

THE WOUNDED DON'T CRY

One

Wednesday

The sun was just rising, outlining Mount Rainier in a halo of golden light. A gentle breeze was blowing, filling the house with the scents of cottonwood and flowers. The birds were singing, the happy chirp of the sparrows and finches combined with the somewhat grumpy *cheep* of the red-wing blackbird that liked to bully the other birds off the feeding station. Coffee was brewing, the rich smell filling the house and blending together with the scents of outdoors and the sounds to create a perfect snapshot of *home*.

There was something special about mornings here on the plateau. It wasn't just the ring of mountains capped by the snowy heights of Mount Rainier, or the trees, birds and animals that inhabited the property. It was all of that and more. Family, the small business that was the happy result of their moving to this place several years before, friends—it all came together here. The rough years were almost forgotten in this place. The work was occasionally hard, but it was for them, the family, and that made it all worthwhile.

Jensen smiled as he made his way to the kitchen. He could hear Jeff and Chris laughing as Chris made breakfast. Even though Chris was the chef in their small farm-to-table café, he still cooked them breakfast every morning before they all scattered to do their jobs for the day. Jensen planned on working on the fence on the east side of the property before lunch. After lunch, he planned on spending time in the gardens, picking produce for the evening service at the café. The tomatoes were ripe and Chris had asked if they could add a tomato salad to the menu.

“Good morning,” Jensen said as he walked into the sunlit kitchen. He poured himself a cup of coffee and carried the pot to the table to refresh the others' cups.

“Morning,” Jeff replied with a smile.

“Can you get the stuff out of the fridge before you sit down?” Chris asked.

“Hey! I said I could get it!” Quinn piped up from where he was sitting at the table.

All three men had spoken at once and Jensen's smile split into a grin. He'd grown up with Chris. They'd met in foster care when they were kids. Chris was older, and had stepped in before school one day when the local bullies were trying to get Jensen's lunch away from him. Since it was the one meal of the day he could count on, Jensen was fighting back and it wasn't going well—until Chris joined in. From that moment, they were friends; in less than six months they were like brothers.

The first summer after they met, they had a chance to enter a program designed to get them out of the city and into the outdoors. It had changed both their lives. One of the counselors, an off-duty park ranger named Jeff Morgan, had taken an interest in them and helped them through the program. He was a kind man, and had been horrified when he'd found out they had been abandoned by their families. Most of the kids he'd dealt with before had been the children of broken homes or recovering addicts. When the summer was over, Jensen and Chris had been reluctant to leave. Jeff had shown them both kindness they'd never really known and had treated them as family—not something to toss aside. There had been tears when they left, promising to do anything to get back into the program the next year.

Jeff had other ideas.

Unbeknownst to them, he had been enquiring about the possibility of becoming their foster parent, with the hopes of adopting them sometime down the line. He'd known it would be difficult, if not impossible, but, as Jeff said "take the impossible and just ignore that damn *im*." He'd stayed in touch with them, never revealing his plan, until that Christmas. He'd invited Jensen and Chris to dinner. Their foster families had jumped on the chance to get them out of the house—what they didn't know was Jeff had no intention of letting them go back. It was a Christmas gift—although Chris insisted, to this day, it was their Christmas miracle. Jensen still remembered Jeff asking if they wanted to stay there, if they wouldn't mind if he became their Dad. The memory always brought the same rush of warmth and affection. They had walked into Jeff's house two unsure orphans, by the end of dinner, they were a family.

Quinn had joined the family later. After high school, Chris had enlisted. Jensen hated saying goodbye as Chris boarded the plane to boot camp. It was hard to see the family separated at all. Chris, however, had flourished in the service and had been posted to Joint Base Lewis McChord in Washington State. It had been fine for a while, with Chris sending emails about the area and "hunting bigfoot" while on maneuvers. When Chris got leave the first time, he'd come home with "a stray", as Jeff said, in tow. Quinn was quiet most of the time, but he had a sly sense of humor that would set Jeff laughing. He treated Jensen like a brother and as Christmas dinner (in February) was ending, Jensen knew their family had just expanded by one. Everything seemed right with the world.

All that had changed when the order to ship out had come down. In eight weeks Chris and Quinn gone. Their first tour seemed to take an eternity, but they returned home in one piece. When the order came for them to ship out again, it had been even harder to say goodbye. It had been like the first deployment at first. Jensen and Jeff been able to contact them for several weeks after they arrived overseas, but then everything had gone dark. It had stayed that way for what seemed like years—until the call Jensen and Jeff were dreading came. Chris had been caught in a car-bombing, Quinn right beside him. They were both injured, Chris was in critical condition. It had been a long five days that Jeff and Jensen had waited by the phone, sleeping in relays so not to miss a call. Finally, late in the night on day six, they had heard that Chris and Quinn were going to make it. A month after that, they were well enough to be shipped home to the VA hospital closest to Jeff and Jensen.

Seeing them for the first time had been hard. Though they both smiled when Jeff and Jensen had come into the room, the smiles soon faded. Their eyes were clouded with pain, physical and mental, their gazes haunted by what had happened. They wouldn't talk to anyone except each other and Jeff or Jensen—whoever was with them at the time. They refused to trust the staff, refused to talk in group therapy as they recovered physically. After six months, they had been released and come home. By then it was clear they couldn't function without each other. When Chris stumbled physically, Quinn would catch him—when Quinn was frozen in terror, caught in the ravages of PTSD, Chris was there to catch him. They would joke, albeit a little wanly, that they were each other's service dog.

Things had seemed okay for the first year they were home. Chris and Quinn were quiet and kept to the house or yard, but they were recovering. Everything changed again when the summer arrived, the desert winds blowing hot day in and day out. First Quinn, then Chris had withdrawn. Finally, one dark night, Chris had gone to Jeff and said they couldn't make it there. They had to get away from the desert, it smelled too much like another desert, and it wouldn't let them rest. Chris had said he and Quinn were leaving in the morning to go back to the Northwest where they'd trained.

When they'd come down the stairs the next morning with their bags packed, Jeff already had the car loaded. He and Jensen had packed everything overnight. They'd moved what they couldn't take with them, or leave in the house, to storage, and were ready to go wherever the family needed to be. The four of them had taken their time along the way. Stopping at various places to see the country, even settling for one week at a campground in Montana in the Bitterroot Mountains. The longer they were on the road, the better Chris and Quinn had gotten. They were talkative when it was just the four of them, though they were still quiet in public. By the time they reached the Pacific Northwest, Jensen knew moving had been the best thing for his brothers.

As luck would have it, they found a little run-down farm with a small farm stand on their third day in Washington. Jeff had pulled off the road and called the number on the sign even before they headed down the driveway for a closer look. It turned out to have more land than they thought originally—nearly thirty acres. As they toured the property, Chris had started talking about the idea of turning the farm stand into a café. Part of his rehabilitation had involved cooking classes and he had embraced his new skills with zeal. Cooking, he told Jensen, gave him the joy of creating and he needed to know he could still make something that was good. Jensen had never pursued what his brother meant with the comment, he just knew that when he was first home the only time Chris smiled at all was when he was cooking.

"Hey!" The exclamation was followed by a none-too-gentle punch on Jensen's shoulder.

"Ow! What?" he said, snapping out of the memories.

"I said is there going to be enough basil for the salad and to make pesto tonight?" Chris asked again.

"Definitely. It has to be picked or it's going to start blooming."

"Good, I put it on the menu, but then thought I'd better ask before I started cooking."

"I can help this afternoon," Quinn offered.

"Don't you have those kids coming by today?" Jeff asked.

"I do, but they are supposed to be gone by one. Longer than that and either me or the horses get jumpy," he said with an easy smile.

"That's a good excuse," Chris said, laughing.

"It works too," Quinn replied. "I could use a little help, though, if you have some time, Jeff."

"Of course I can. I'd rather spend time with the horses than paperwork any day." Jeff grinned. "If you're sure Odin had gotten over his beef with me."

"I'm not sure he has, but it's good for him to be with you. He has to learn that people aren't going to hurt him." Quinn shook his head. "I wished I'd gotten to him when he was a colt."

"You can't save them all," Chris said gently.

"I know, doesn't stop me from wishing I could. Which reminds me, Lasky called last night and said he found another one out in Black Diamond. He's going to get him tomorrow and wanted to know if I had room."

"How big is it?" Jeff asked resignedly.

Jensen hid a smile. Shortly after they had moved onto the farm, Quinn had discovered a colt wandering the property. The animal had clearly been abused, one shoe was missing, there were wounds on its flanks and it was close to starving. He had brought it home with all the enthusiasm of a kid with a puppy. They'd tried to find its owners, but no one had stepped forward and after three months, animal control had let Quinn keep the horse. Jeff had been

reluctant at first, horses weren't cheap to keep, especially since the colt had turned out to be a Percheron. But seeing Quinn blossom over the three months he was caring for the horse changed his mind. Quinn had spent part of his youth on a ranch in Texas and working with the horse did more good in three months than a year of therapy before they moved.

A month after Loki was a permanent resident at the farm, Lasky, the local animal control officer, had called them. He and Quinn had formed a comfortable acquaintance and he respected Quinn's abilities so when he discovered horses in trouble, he called Quinn. That day, they had returned with a huge animal that had been horrifically abused. Quinn was afraid they were going to lose her, and had sat in the stable with her for two days. Freya had pulled through, and despite the abuse she'd suffered, she was a gentle creature. Since then, five more draft horses and a llama had moved onto the farm. They all thrived under Quinn's gentle care.

"It's a Shetland, so not too big," Quinn said with a grin.

"It's a good thing I was planning on getting the east fence fixed today," Jensen said, pouring himself another cup of coffee.

"Jensen," Jeff said gently. "Are you sure you should be working on something like that?" His eyes were filled with concern. Quinn and Chris were fixing him with the same look.

"It's fine!" Jensen snapped, flexed his hand and took a slow breath. They only worried because they cared, he repeated to himself. He was just tired of... "It's fine, I'll quit if I feel off okay? I want to get it done before someone moves into the property next door."

"Any word on the sale?" Chris asked, setting a skillet on the table and putting serving spoons in the mix of eggs and potatoes. Jensen smiled his thanks for the change of subject.

"Not a word. Just that it was sold," Jeff said. "I asked everyone at the Chamber meeting on Tuesday."

"And no one knows who bought it?"

"No, it's going through a third party agent or something. Someone tried to explain it but..."

"It all sounded like blah blah blah," Chris and Jensen finished for him, then started laughing.

"Exactly," Jeff agreed, joining their laughter. "I expect we'll find out soon enough. It's not often that a multimillion dollar property sells, even up here. Now, let's finish breakfast and get to work."

"Yes, sir," they all chorused and the conversation turned to the work for the day.

Two

There was a hint of fall on the air as Jensen made his way to the fence on the east side of their property. The horses were playing in the other field, for all the world looking like they were playing a complicated game of tag. Freya was chasing Loki, and then they would turn and chase Thor, a huge Percheron back across to where Henry the llama was looking on with camelid disdain. Suddenly, as if a switch had been thrown, the horses stopped and stared over the fence at the far side of the property, then with a happy sound, they thundered to where Quinn and Jeff were approaching the gate.

Jensen stopped and watched as the hoses pranced in front of the gate, kicking up their heels and tossing their manes as Quinn stepped through to greet them. He could hear Jeff's laugh as Thor bumped up against him more like a playful puppy than a huge horse.

The call of a raptor distracted him, Jensen glanced up and saw the birds circling above him. He could just make out the speckled feathers of a red-tailed hawk. They were common in the area and there were a couple that seemed to enjoy watching him work. Two days before, a hawk had perched on the massive cottonwood and ‘supervised’ Jensen almost all day. Every time he took a break, the raptor was there, watching him. Jensen set his tools and the ground and checked the fence. When he looked up at the cottonwood, sure enough, the hawk was there, eyes fixed on Jensen and the fence.

With a happy sigh, Jensen set to work. The fence had been damaged in a wind storm the weekend before, and while it was not completely down, it was bad enough that they didn’t dare let the horses into that field. This side of the farm was open pasture, one of the interesting features of the “plateau.” When he’d first moved to the Northwest, he assumed everything was covered in the thick fir-dominated rainforest. The plateau, however, reminded him of the cottonwood lined fields in the interior west. The entire area was ringed by the foothills of the Cascades, giving the feeling of being in a valley, rather than on a plateau.

After flexing his hands several times to loosen them up, he picked up the shovel and started to work. There was something calming in this kind of labor, almost contemplative once he found his rhythm. Before they’d moved to the farm, he’d never really done this kind of work. Jeff had made sure that both he and Chris could use tools and fix what needed to be fixed and Jensen had always enjoyed fixing things, but this kind of work had not really been needed where he’d grown up or after he graduated from university. When they’d first acquired the farm, Jensen set to work getting the fences secure and cleaning out the mass over overgrown weeds in the plots behind the stand and found he’d really enjoyed it.

After half an hour, he paused to have drink of water. The light was beautiful at this time of day. It had an almost golden color, unique to the late summer. The air seemed to be alive with bright motes of glitter—small particles of dust combined with the many air born seeds that filled the pastures from spring through fall. As always, his eyes strayed to the mountain, bright white and blue against the darker blue of the sky. He shook his head in wonder, the mountain never looked the same from day to day and season to season. Even after a string of sunny summer days, it looked a different every time he glanced its way. Knowing it was, at least technically, a live volcano added to its beauty for him, that knowledge that at any moment it might be gone in a flash of ash and smoke like its sister peak to the south.

They’d gone to visit Mount St. Helens one day the year before. As they ascended the walk to the overlook of the volcano’s crater, Jensen had been struck by the echo of nature’s fury around him. The remnants of massive trees lay on the slopes, all pointed away from the mountain, felled by the blast that blew the side of the mountain away in May 1980. Even in the face of that destruction, there had been a beauty there—perhaps because of the destruction, he was never sure. More than the beauty had been a sense of hope that was hard to explain. The land had been terribly wounded, yet was healing; trees were growing, bright green grass and wildflowers covered the slopes, animals large and small had returned to the area. It was returning to life, and that gave him hope. He unconsciously rubbed his hand, thinking about that place and returning sometime to maybe... He stopped himself before he got lost in melancholy and instead looked towards Rainier again, towering over the other hills.

“Jensen! Hello!”

“Marty! What brings you up here?” Jensen said, talking off his glove and shaking the man’s hand.

“Surveying the place for the new owner,” Marty said, leaning on the fence.

“Do you know who it is?”

“That’s the million dollar question isn’t it?” The man laughed. “Guy named Cohen came by and arranged the survey. Not even Maggie’s cookies could charm the new owner’s name out of him.”

“And?” Jensen knew there was more.

“Don’t know, the guy seemed a little...” He shrugged.

“A little?”

“Tough? Not in a kick-your-ass in a bar kind of way, more a lawyer way, if you know what I mean.”

“I do,” Jensen agreed, nodding his head.

“I tend to like the ass-kickers more than the lawyers. Nothing good ever comes from lawyers, least not that slick business type, you know?”

“Marty, we aren’t getting paid to lean on the... Oh, hi!” Maggie, Marty’s business partner and wife said walking up to the fence. “How’s everything?”

“Good. You should stop by the café when you’re done, Chris is making pesto and that fresh tomato salad you like.”

“Oh, that sounds like a good idea. We need pesto, Marty,” Maggie said with a smile.

“We do,” Marty agreed. “I’ll see if I can get more info out of Cohen when we send in the report. I’ll let you know when we come in for dinner.”

“Okay!” Jensen watched them walk away and turned back to the fence.

The sun had just passed its zenith when Jensen heard the horses in the field, he glanced up and saw Quinn, Jeff and a group of kids at the gate. Thor was prancing in front of the gate, doing what Chris called his “see me, I am so adorable I need treats” act. Freya was watching him like a disapproving older sister and Odin—a Shire horse even larger than Thor—was racing towards the group, no doubt worried that carrots were being handed out and he wasn’t going to get his fair share. Jensen watched it all with a smile on his face. Working with animals and kids was as good for Quinn as cooking was for Chris and the change in the two men over the last four years was good to see.

Jensen glanced over his work. The fence was in good shape again. The new posts would need to be painted, but he could do that tomorrow. He gathered his tools, pleased with what he’d accomplished. He saw Marty and Maggie and waved at them as he headed towards the truck. After tossing his gear in the back, he climbed in and started the motor.

He loved the truck. It had been a gift from the family a year before, after he’d had to sell his car because he couldn’t handle the manual transmission anymore. He’d hated selling the car but had felt good about contributing the money from the sale to the farm. Then, several months after he’d sold the car, they had been shopping in Enumclaw and they happened into one of the many spontaneous events on the plateau—in this case a car show—and he’d seen a 1962 Ford F-100 truck. While the others had been going from car to car, he’d stopped and chatted with the owner who was in the process of restoring it. He’d spent nearly two hours talking about the truck and cars in general. Jensen would never describe himself as a “car guy”, per se, it was more a love with the art of the automobile—the lines of the body, the colors, even the sound of the engine all blended together into an art form for him. Newer cars, mostly, didn’t conjure that same sense of art for him and spending time talking to someone who shared his views had been fun.

He’d been absolutely stunned when, a month later, he’d come downstairs into the kitchen to discover a box with a bow on the table. He could see the truck sitting in the driveway and had

been speechless for several long minutes. Jensen had tried to give the truck back to the family, but they had all fixed him with the exact same look and then the three of them had led him out, insisting he take it for a drive *right then*. Since then, they had allowed him to add a sign to the door for Heavy Horses Café (and Draft Rescue). When he offered to make payments on the truck, Jeff pointed to the ad and said he was helping bring in business. Jensen had learned over the years that when Jeff got that set to his chin it meant the issue was settled, off the table and that was that. End of statement.

When he reached the main road, he had to stop and open the gate that led onto their property. As he walked back to the truck, he noticed a gray Mercedes pull into the long driveway next door. The windows of the sleek car were darkened and he couldn't see the driver at all. Once again he found himself wondering who had bought the property. The house sat on a hill overlooking their land. It crouched there, dark glass and overgrown gardens and had been there, empty, since they had moved onto the farm. The price was one thing that had kept it vacant. They'd looked it up one night and had been shocked by the asking price of more than 1.2 million. Jensen had known their land was worth more than they'd paid, but knowing what the house and property next door cost worried him now and then. Their farm was in a protected class, their property taxes lower than the surrounding residential areas because it was still agricultural land—but that didn't stop the worry that someday the taxes would go up or a developer would come in and try and take it. The family assured him it was nothing to worry about, but he did.

He shook his head to clear it of thoughts like that and turned the truck towards home. He planned on spending the afternoon in the garden and that always helped when a mood was creeping up on him. Jensen tried to stay positive, but sometimes all the little things that could go wrong would haunt him. When Jeff or Chris or Quinn told him to stop worrying, it couldn't be *that* bad, he would try and smile. After all Chris and Quinn had been through hell and were healing, getting stronger every day.

"You are too, Jensen," Jeff had reminded him just the night before. "Never forget that—you are too."

Somedays it didn't feel like that. Jensen sighed. Somedays it was hard not to remember what he'd lost.

Three

It was warm in the gardens, the sun lit the vegetable plots almost all day and by afternoon it would be warm enough to remind Jensen a little of the Southwest. It was only a fleeting reminder, though. The light was different here, gold instead of the bright, flat white of the desert West. The scents were different here too, the rich, loamy soil, the tang of the cottonwoods and always the background scent of moisture. The plateau was both wetter and drier than the surrounding country. They had considerably less fog, and less of the day-long steady rainfall that the lower areas were prone too, but a lot of the plateau was reclaimed wetlands and it was covered in cottonwoods that filled the wet, boggy areas with greedy roots.

"How many of these stupid things do you need?" Quinn complained from the tomato patch.

"Chris said two baskets of the mixed heirlooms."

"Why are they so small?"

“Because we have a short growing season here for heirlooms, so if Chris wants tomatoes grown in our garden, we either need to grow cherry tomatoes or build a greenhouse.” Jensen tried not to sigh, he knew Quinn was mostly joking, but they had this discussion every time they picked tomatoes.

“He’s too picky.”

“Would you rather pick basil?” Jensen looked up from the plant he was carefully snipping leaves off.

“Would I have to pick both colors?”

“Yes.”

“Why does he need both?” Quinn grumbled as he returned to plucking tomatoes from the vine.

“It would go faster if you didn’t eat half of them, you know.”

“I’m only eating the ones the birds have taken a peck out of.” Quinn grinned and popped another tomato in his mouth.

“I doubt there are that many.”

“Actually there are,” Quinn replied. “For some reason they are going after the purple ones more than the bright red or the yellow pear. Maybe because they’re sweeter?”

“Really?” Jensen stood and walked over to where Quinn was surrounded by tomatoes. He lifted one of the vines and noticed almost every one of the dark purple and green tomatoes had a small hole in it. “This does look like birds.”

“They like the weird ones, I guess. There are enough to get for the café, but way more of these are being eaten.”

“I think you’re right, they are a lot sweeter than the others,” Jensen said, after tasting one of the fruits.

“They are!” Quinn picked another, checked it, and tossed it in his mouth. “More for me.”

“Just make sure there’re enough for dinner service.”

“It’s not me, it’s the birds!”

“Fine, you and the birds make sure there are enough for dinner, or Chris will have our hides.”

“There is that.” Quinn laughed happily and turned back to the vines.

Jensen returned to his work. He was picking bright green sweet basil and the more pungent dark “purple ruffles” variety as well. He was keeping them separate. Chris liked to mix them together in his salads and had lectured Quinn and Jensen at length one day on “eating with eyes first”, but the one time he had made pesto with the purple kind, people had been turned off by the strange color the purple basil turned when crushed. Looking at the sheer amount of basil that needed to be harvested before it blossomed, he was considering asking Chris to have pesto as the weekend special as well. It tended to get bitter after it bloomed, and while the family didn’t mind, Chris absolutely refused to serve it in the café. At the end of the row, he could see the chives, several of them were covered with blossoms. Chris liked to add them to the menu now and then. Jensen was considering calling his brother, or just picking some, when he heard Quinn’s phone ringing.

“Hey!” Quinn said as he answered. “Almost got the tomatoes done.”

“Ask him if he wants chive flowers,” Jensen called.

“Hey, Jensen wants to know if you want... Hey, calm down, what’s going on?” Quinn stood, the baskets in his hand.

“What’s going on?”

“They want us home as soon as we can get there,” Quinn said, frowning in concern.

“Are they okay?”

“Not injured,” Quinn replied as he broke the connection. “But something is wrong, he’s freaked. He said Maggie and Marty are there.”

“They said they were going to come for dinner, it’s early though.” Jensen picked up the baskets of basil and they started walking towards the house.

“He’s freaked. I haven’t heard that tone in his voice since,” Quinn glanced at him, “well, since that night.”

“What?”

“Yeah, so you know, it’s not good,” Quinn concluded grimly.

Chris and Jeff were in the front of the café when they arrived, sitting with Maggie and Marty at one of the tables. There was a stiffness to Jeff’s posture that spelled disaster.

“Are you sure?” Chris was asking as Jensen walked into the room.

“We ran the transit three times, and it was the same every time,” Marty answered.

“But how? We’ve been here almost four years!”

“We called the city, they pulled the plats for us and checked. It looks like there were some land sales made, but whoever used to own next door, didn’t care.”

“What’s going on?” Jensen put his hand on Jeff’s shoulder.

“The new owner next door wanted a complete survey,” Maggie said.

“Yeah?”

“The property lines are wrong, Jensen, we’re going to lose the east pasture.” Jeff looked at him.

“What? That’s almost ten acres!”

“We know, we’re sick about it,” Maggie said.

“But how?” Jensen asked, aghast.

“It’s probably been that way for decades. Then, whoever built the house was more concerned with the house than the land, at least that’s what we think. When they built the house in 1993, land was expensive, but nothing like it is today. We had Brad at the city check and the house was first listed a few years ago 800k. Now it’s more than a million—and that’s because of the land value,” Marty said.

“We think the new owner has to have suspected something,” Maggie said. “I’ll bet good money that’s what’s going on.”

The bell on the door jingled. A man in a very expensive suit was standing just inside. “Hello?”

“We’re not open yet.”

“I’m not here for food,” he said, stepping closer.

“Mr. Cohen,” Marty nearly growled. “This is the guy who hired us.”

He smiled and held his hand out to Jeff. “Are you Jeff Morgan? I’m Matt Cohen and I represent your new neighbor.”

Jeff took his hand and shook it. “Our new neighbor who is?”

“Moving in,” the lawyer said smoothly. “I just received the email from the city about the property line.”

“That was fast, we only sent the report an hour and a half ago,” Marty said.

“I pay for very good service.” He glanced around at them, his eyes coming to rest on Jensen. “Have we met?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“You look familiar.”

“You don’t,” Jensen said.

“Right,” Cohen smiled. “Anyway, Mr. Morgan, I’ve come on behalf of my client. He knows the property line is somewhat askew and would like to rectify the situation.”

“And how do we do that?” Jeff asked wearily.

“You may purchase it, or you may vacate that part.” He pulled a set of papers out of his coat and handed them to Jeff.

The room was silent as Jeff read. Jensen was getting uncomfortable, the lawyer had fixed him with a look that was becoming intrusive. He was about to say something when Jeff handed him the papers. Jensen looked down, his eyes immediately going to the numbers in bold.

“Eighty thousand dollars?” He demanded, reading them again.

“That’s below current market, I assure you,” Cohen said smoothly.

“I’ll need time to discuss this with my family,” Jeff said politely. Jensen wondered if the lawyer could hear the steel under his father’s mild tone.

“I’ll be back tomorrow.”

“We need more time.”

“I’ll be back tomorrow.” He smiled and gave Jensen one more searching look and left.

“What are we going to do?” Quinn said as soon as the door closed.

“Right now, we are going to help Chris prep for service,” Jeff said, standing and smiling at them. “We’ll worry about this tomorrow.”

“Jeff.” Jensen stopped him with a hand on his arm. “No, wait, all of you, there’s the…” Jensen started, then stopped when he saw the looks on his family’s faces.

“No,” they said together.

“Absolutely not, Jensen,” Jeff said, putting his arm around his shoulders. “Even if there was enough, no.”

“He’s right, no way in hell,” Chris said firmly.

“Don’t look at me,” Quinn added. “I’m on their side.”

“But I have the truck, too, maybe I could…”

“No!” they chorused again.

Quinn fixed him with a look so like Chris’s Jensen almost smiled. “What would you say if I said we could sell Odin and Thor?”

“NO!” Jensen snapped. There was no way he was letting them sell the horses. He stopped when he realized they’d trapped him. “Fine. We’ll talk about it tomorrow.”

“Good.” Jeff clapped him on the back. “Help me get the tables ready. Quinn it’s your turn to help in the kitchen.”

“But I picked the stupid tomatoes!”

“Yep, and now you’re going to help prep them.” Chris laughed and they headed back into the kitchen.

Jensen opened his mouth to broach the subject again, then closed it when he saw the look on Jeff’s face. They would talk about it tomorrow.

Thursday

The killdeer that lived in the pond at the edge of the property was calling when Jensen woke. He glanced at the clock, it was nearly three, but the moon was shining through the

window. That explained the birds being out on the hunt this late. He tried to relax again, but what had happened was spinning through his head and try as he might, he couldn't get back to sleep. Finally he got up, planning to head into the kitchen and break into the leftovers from dinner. On the way down the stairs, he stepped on the creaky step. He suppressed a sigh and continued to the ground floor, knowing he would be alone for less than five minutes. Sounds at night, even ones that were half-expected would wake Chris or Quinn or both of them.

The kitchen was quiet and warm, the lingering scents of the food from the café filling it. Jensen headed straight for the foil wrapped bread sitting on the counter. Chris made sourdough bread every day and it had become such a draw at the café that they usually sold out. Leftovers of bread were coveted and, since he usually slept during the early part of the night, he rarely managed to get any. He had just pulled the herbed butter out of the fridge when he heard a step behind him.

“You planning on sharing?” Chris asked as Jensen turned to face him.

“Depends. What's in it for me?” Jensen replied as he set the bread and butter on the table.

“I'll make hot chocolate.” Chris was already getting the milk out of the fridge.

“It's a deal.” Jensen got the mugs out of the cupboard, grabbing an extra one, since he was sure now that Chris was up, Quinn would soon follow.

“So, want to tell me why you're up raiding the kitchen?” Chris said as he stirred the contents of the pot on the stove.

“I wanted some bread?”

“Uh huh.”

“I want you to...”

“Don't even say it,” Chris snapped.

“Say what?”

“That you want me to talk to Jeff about using the savings account. No fucking way.”

“Chris, look, I...”

“No. Don't even start with me, Jensen. We are not using that money.” Chris pulled the pot off the stove and looked at him. “When Quinn and I needed to move, you left everything—even your career—without question. When we found this farm, you helped us get it. You are not giving up that money. You think we're going to let you do that?”

“You all stood by me after...” Jensen trailed off. “I can do what I want with the money.”

“No you can't.”

“You bought me the truck, and...”

“No.”

“But Chris...”

“No.”

“We need the pasture for the horses.”

“No.” Chris crossed his arms. “We will figure something out.”

“I want to help,” Jensen insisted.

“And you are.”

“With the money.”

“No.”

“Are you just going to stand there and repeat no to me?”

“Probably, and when he gets hoarse from saying no, I'll start in,” Quinn said from the door. “There better be bread left.” He sat down at the table while Chris poured them all chocolate. “He's right, Jensen, we're not going to let you use that money.”

“We can save more,” Jensen offered.

“Yes, we can. And we can buy the land later too, if we need to. The longer you wait, the harder it will be, so no, you are not using that money.”

“But we don’t even know if there will ever be enough for surgery, Chris, we need the money for the land now.”

“I am going to say no one more time, and if you contradict me, I will just kick your ass.” Chris glared at him. “Then he will.”

“I will,” Quinn agreed amiably. “We’ll figure this out, just like always.”

Jensen sighed, knowing he’d lost the argument. He’d have to find another way to get them to accept the money.

They never made it back to bed. The three of them had stayed up chatting until six, when Chris had started breakfast and Quinn and Jensen had gone out to take care of the animals. By the time they were back, Chris had coffee made and Jeff was sitting at the table. From the look on his father’s face, Jensen guessed that Chris had told him about their conversation the night before. He loved his family, but sometimes they drove him nuts with their need-to-know policy.

Chris had just poured them all coffee when the bell on the café delivery door rang. Jeff started to get up to answer it, muttering about deliveries coming “too damn early”.

“I’ll go, Jeff,” Jensen stopped him. “You have coffee.”

“Thanks, I’m not quite human until my first cup.”

“We know, we know.” Jensen laughed and headed through the house and across the drive to the café. He opened the delivery door and was surprised to see the Matt Cohen standing there. “You’re here early.”

“I wanted to catch you before you all went to work.”

“I was going to call you,” Jensen said, taking a deep breath. “But you can’t tell my family until...”

“Wait,” the lawyer said, holding up a hand. “Before you go any further, I’ve come with an offer from my employer.”

“You gave us one, pay up or vacate,” Jensen growled. “And I have...”

“My employer would like to offer a third solution,” Cohen went on as if Jensen hadn’t spoken.

“What?”

“A third solution,” he said with an easy smile.

“What kind of solution?” Jensen asked suspiciously.

“A fair offer. My employer is nothing if not fair.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes.”

“What’s this offer?”

“There is considerably more work around the house and the property than he was anticipating when he purchased it. So, his offer is this, he needs a fulltime, hmmm, handyman as well as labor fixing the fences and clearing the gardens, which will require two or three people over the course of several months. So his offer is this—one person to live at the house five and a half days a week and do what needs to be done there, and the rest of you to offer several days here and there to take care of the big jobs. In exchange for this, he will deed the land over after one year.”

It sounded too good to be true. “Why?”

“It is to everyone’s benefit.”

“He gets the work done and a write off for the land?”

“Something like that,” Cohen replied.

“And you’ll give a written guarantee?”

“I have it with me.”

“Jensen? What’s going on?” Jeff asked from behind him.

“I can’t speak for my family,” Jensen said, ignoring the others behind him.

“I need someone fulltime.”

“You’ve got him. I am just not volunteering them.”

“Jensen?” Chris demanded. “We told you, you can’t touch the...”

“I’m not. He’s come with an offer, and I think we should take it.”

“What is it?” Jeff stepped forward and Cohen handed him a folded set of papers. Jeff walked to a table and sat down, quickly shuffling through the stack. “Chris? Quinn? Would you look at these, please?” After several minutes, Jeff stood.

“Before you say anything, Jeff, I’m going, so don’t volunteer for that. The farm needs you here.”

“Jensen, no,” Jeff said quietly.

“We need the fields for the horses, Jeff. It’s this or the money. I am giving you a choice.” Jensen crossed his arms and glared at his family, aware that Cohen was watching them with the enthusiasm of a spectator at a tennis match.

“That’s blackmail,” Chris said.

“It’s not, Chris. I can do this. I have a day and a half off a week. I can arrange my hours to come and help here in the morning or evening.”

“We’re not talking about the café.” Chris glared back.

“I know, but... I need to do this. I haven’t been able to do as much as I used to since...”

“Don’t even start that!” Jeff snapped. He took a deep breath and met Jensen’s eyes. “Will you be alright there, son?”

“Yes. I want—I need to do this for us.”

Jeff walked over and gave Jensen a one-armed hug, then held his hand out to the lawyer. “Okay, Mr. Cohen, we agree to your terms. Jensen will be fulltime for one year, and the rest of us will work as needed to get the rest of it done.”

“Good,” Cohen said, shaking first Jeff’s hands, then the rest in turn. “I’m very glad we could work this out.”

There was something about his smile that made Jensen wonder what was going on, but for the moment he was grateful he could help.

Four

Thursday

It was quiet when Jensen headed into the flower gardens to pick fresh blooms for the tables in the café. He needed the silence, because as soon as the lawyer had left, the family had started up. Chris and Quinn offered to go, then Jeff. It took an hour and a half for Jensen to calm them down enough to even listen to him. Eventually they saw his points—Chris was the chef, Quinn took care of the animals, Jeff handled everything else, Jensen was the only choice that made sense.

Now that he had time to think, he was questioning his motives. His need to help his family was first and foremost, but he wondered if there was something more. He'd never admit it to them, but he felt like a failure some days, like he wasn't... he searched for the word. *Whole* was the only thing that seemed to work. He hadn't felt whole for almost two years, since the night his hands and arm had been destroyed and with them, so much else. Jensen rubbed the scar on his palm. In a way he regretted the family's reluctance to give up the money in the savings account. It was for the surgery to repair the damage that not only the initial attack had done, but the subsequent infection and removal of the hardware the surgeon had used immediately after the injury. They still didn't know if any surgery they could afford would fix it enough for fine movement, and if he'd been able to give up the money, he wouldn't have to face that eventuality.

The last thing he really wanted was to leave the family and the farm, but barring the money, it was the only way he could think to keep the pasture. The offer still seemed too good to be true, and he wondered what had prompted the new owner to give up \$80,000. Labor was expensive, but was there really enough to make the deal worth it? They'd looked up the house online, and it didn't really look like the inside, at least, needed a lot of work. Granted the gardens were mostly overgrown or filled with a realtor's idea of attractive groundcover. The lawn looked like other than mowing, it had been neglected for years. Even on the touched-up photos online, the dark spots of weeds and the brown of dead grass were visible. Even so, was that worth what had been offered? Jensen sighed, then shook his head. Maybe he should stop looking a gift horse in the mouth. The savings account didn't have enough in it, and even if he sold the truck, they would be short thousands. And it wasn't like he was leaving forever, or even going that far away.

The gladiolas were in bloom and he picked several for the entryway of the café. Chris wouldn't let him put the glads in the restaurant itself because the variety that dominated the gardens had a distinct grape scent to them and Chris said it ruined his food. There were enough bright yellow dahlias for one on each table. He gathered those, then picked several sprays of white pearly everlastings to compliment the dahlias. He noticed that the nasturtiums were getting a little "leggy" so he stopped and trimmed them, hoping Chris could use the leaves in a salad. On the way back through the flowers, he stopped in the long grass. He loved the way the brown seeds played against the soft gold and green of the stalk. Smiling, he gently coaxed a praying mantis off one of the stalks at the very edge of the patch and then cut some to add to the bouquets.

Jensen carried the flowers into the café and grabbed the black vases, thinking they would contrast best with the items he'd chosen. He had to admit, he was happy that Chris and Quinn had put him in charge of the flowers. When they'd first suggested it, he'd been hesitant. Flower arranging didn't appeal all that much, but he'd quickly come to love deciding on color and textural pairings. It let him use his art training in a tangible way. It let the aching wound that had appeared when his hand had been crippled ease a little. As he started working on the first vase, he decided the pearly everlastings were the wrong weight for the bouquet. He set them aside to dry for later and started putting the grass into the vases with the dahlias. When he was satisfied with them, he set a vase on each table, then stood back to look at the overall effect.

"What is it with you and weeds?" Chris said from the kitchen door.

"It's grass."

"Most people mow it."

"Most people poison dandelions, not serve them in salad too," Jensen countered.

"Touche." Chris smiled. "I like the way those look. You know, Mrs. Petersen asked if you'd do some work for her shop. Decorations, you know?"

“I’ll have to think about it.” Jensen held up his hand to stop the protest he knew was coming. “Only until I know how much work the new job is going to take. I’m not saying no.”

“She did say she would pay half in chocolates.”

“And the real reason comes through,” Jensen said, laughing. Christian Petersen and his wife were the latest in a long family of chocolatiers, and their gourmet candy shop was a destination spot for many tourists on their way to the ski slopes at Crystal Mountain. His family had discovered the shop on their first visit into town to go shopping and shortly after the café opened, Chris had offered the Petersens a small counter in the café as well—on the understanding that at least half the rent was paid in chocolates.

“If the chocolate supply gets too low, Jeff panics, you know that.”

“I do!” He paused when his phone rang. “Hello?”

“This is Matt Cohen. I am heading to the house, and wondered if you wanted to meet me at the gate. I can show you your apartment and give you a key.”

“Sure, when do you want me there?” Jensen asked.

“Half an hour?”

“I’ll be there.” Jensen broke the connection. “Cohen wants to show me where I’ll be staying.”

“When?”

Jensen glanced at the clock. “Eleven.”

“You want one of us to go?”

“I’ll be fine, I’m going to look at the apartment and get the key. I’m not moving without your help.”

“Oh joy.” Chris clapped him on the shoulder with a smile.

Jensen was watching a crow harass a bald eagle in the branches of an old cottonwood snag when he heard a car approaching. Turning, he spotted the dark Mercedes he’d seen the day before. The car pulled up beside him and the window slid down.

“Follow me up to the house, I’ll give you the code for the gate with everything else,” Cohen said, then rolled the window up.

Jensen got in his truck and followed the Mercedes up to the house. The long drive was wider than a typical driveway, it was nearly as wide as the highway that ran from Bonney Lake. The property was more run down than he’d guessed from the photos. The lawn was a mess of grass and thistles, there was a fence that was partially down between the house and what looked like a small barn and the gardens were nothing but ugly bushes and weed-filled beauty bark. He pulled the truck up in front of a garage door.

“That’s your garage,” Cohen said as Jensen walked up beside him. “Here’s the opener for the door.”

“What’s that?” Jensen asked, pointing at what looked like a huge, oversized garage door to the left of his.

“It was the door for the hanger.”

“Hanger?”

“The original owner had an airplane, that’s why the drive is so big, he used it as a landing strip. He parked it in there. The new owner would like to turn the space into a gym and rec room.”

“One of my projects?”

Cohen smiled. “At least part of it. Of course, we will hire things like electrical and large scale plumbing by professionals.”

“That’s good. I’d feel more comfortable with a pro doing electric stuff.”

“The insurance company does too.” The lawyer was leading the way to a set of double doors tucked under the wrap around deck. “Your apartment is here.” He unlocked the door and handed Jensen a key, then led the way inside. “This part of the house is partially built into the hillside and partially under the deck.”

Jensen looked around the apartment. The doors opened to an entryway with a large room to the right. There was a TV screen on the wall, and by the large carriage windows, a fireplace. He could see the tile floor of the kitchen a little further in and to the left. The carpet was dark green and the walls were stark white. There was an old fashioned mudroom bench inside the entrance. He walked further in, across from the kitchen there was an alcove with a desk, stairs on the left led up and to the right were two doors. He opened them, one led into the bedroom and another to a white and green bathroom.

“The apartment is 750 square feet. The kitchen has a microwave and a cooktop. If you wish to bake, you may use the kitchen in the main house after eight in the morning and before seven at night,” Cohen said, coming up behind where he was standing looking in dismay at the green and white bathroom. “Is there a problem?”

“No, the apartment is great.” Jensen turned to face the lawyer.

“But?”

“The colors are, um…”

“Dreadful?” Cohen offered.

“Pretty much.”

“Feel free to redecorate as you see fit. Our employer wants you to feel comfortable here. I suspected you might wish to have at least the rugs changed, and I have an installer coming later today to put them in. I chose a neutral beige.”

“That’s fine, thank you.”

“We’ve also ordered a bed for the bedroom. If you need any furniture, let us know and I can arrange something for that as well.”

“I won’t need much,” Jensen said with a laugh.

“There’s a TV in the living room, it’s set up for the satellite and streaming. The modem in the office alcove is for your use as well. Our employer would like you to start on Monday.”

“I was planning on that. I’ll start moving in tomorrow before dinner service, if that’s okay?”

“That’s fine. And any paint, tile or other items you purchase to redecorate will be reimbursed if you give me the receipts.”

“Can I tear that cabinet out of the bathroom?” Jensen asked, expecting a no.

“Please do.”

“Seriously?”

“Yes, it’s your home for a year, and I’m sure that any changes you make will increase, not decrease, the overall value of the house.”

“How can you be so sure?”

Cohen smiled again. Jensen was getting a little tired of that particular smile. “Because I am.”

“Okay. Do you know what I’ll be doing?”

“As I said,” the lawyer said, leading the way back through the apartment, “you will be a handyman of sorts. There’s the gym. The gardens need work, and our employer will need some help with basic changes in the main house. Painting, that kind of thing. Some of the color choices are as questionable as down here—and that part of the house was redone to prepare for sale. The fences need repairing, the barn needs to be cleaned and painted.”

“So it is a barn.”

“It is. I’m not exactly sure what the plans are for it, I was just told it needed to be cleaned and painted.” Cohen made a face. “I’m afraid the original owner had livestock of some kind, so it will not be entirely pleasant.”

“My brother rescues draft horses. I’m sure it can’t be worse than what I deal with daily.”

“Perhaps. I’m not the best judge of things like that.”

“I can believe that,” Jensen said. “Uh, sorry.”

“It’s fine. The shit I shovel is more figurative,” the lawyer replied, chuckling.

“I think I prefer the literal kind.” Jensen smiled, then sobered. “Before I can start, I need to know who I am working for.”

“You have already signed the contract.”

“I know. I still want to know who I’m working for before I start.”

Cohen met his eyes for a long moment. “Jared Padalecki.”

Jensen knew he was staring, but couldn’t help it. He knew the name, of course, everyone in the Northwest did. Padalecki came from one of the “old” money families in the region. He’d built an empire before he was thirty. His business practices were so ruthless and occasionally predatory, it had earned him a nickname that all the news outlets, as well as everyone else used. “The Beast?” Jensen asked.

“The one and only.”

Five

Friday

There was a hint of rain on the air as Jensen loaded his truck. Clouds were hugging the foothills, with wispy tendrils curling through the valleys. It was a refreshing break from the warmth of the last few days. He loved the sun, but he also loved days like this—the sun a bright disc, lost in the clouds, the scent of moisture all around him. It seemed to intensify everything, the tang of the cottonwoods was more pronounced, colors seemed brighter in the filtered light. He could never explain it, and when he’d first arrived in the Northwest, he had worked hard to catch the magic of days like this. Once or twice, he thought he caught it just right, but he was never sure. And now, he thought a little bitterly, that was gone.

“Hey! How much more are you taking?” Chris asked, dropping a box in the bed of the truck.

“I think this is everything for now. I’ll see what else I need after I’ve been there for a few days.”

“Then let’s go so I can help move this in before I need to start cooking. I have Quinn on prep.” Chris grinned. “He lost the toss.”

“What’s he prep... never mind. I don’t want to know.” Jensen laughed and hopped in the truck.

It was less than five minutes to the gate. Jensen typed in the code and pulled up the drive. Somehow, knowing the drive was built for an airplane made it seem even bigger, he wasn't sure why, but it did. For the first time, he used the garage door opener, and pulled the truck into the single bay beside his apartment. The scent of new rugs lingered in the air when he opened the door.

"You weren't kidding about the colors were you?" Chris said, walking in.

"You should have seen it yesterday. The rugs were this dark blue green color. It might have been forest green when it started, but it had faded. Wait till you see the bathroom."

"Is it as bad as the kitchen?"

Jensen walked to where Chris was standing. "I really didn't notice the countertop yesterday," Jensen said, grimacing at the color. "I guess the whole place is dark green and white."

"You're fixing that?"

"He said I could. In fact, he said I could tear out the cabinet vanity in the bathroom. I was planning on that first, but maybe the kitchen."

"Make sure you save all the demolition for Quinn and Jeff."

"I'd never deprive them of the chance to smash things with sledgehammers." Jensen laughed. "In fact, if the boss needs any walls demolished, I will leave that for the group work days."

"Good idea." Chris headed into the garage. "Where do you want the boxes?"

"Just put everything in the bedroom. I'll sort it when I get back tonight."

"It's going to be weird, not having you in the house."

"Are you going to be okay?" Jensen asked seriously.

"I was about to ask you the same thing. We'll be okay. You're a phone call away. I have Quinn and Jeff. Quinn has me and Jeff. Jeff has me and Quinn. We all have your number. I'm more worried about you being alone. It's the first time since the attack."

"I know. I've been thinking about that."

"And?" Chris set the box he was carrying down and leaned against the doorjamb.

"I think I need time alone—more time I mean before you say anything—to be okay with time alone in my own head. Does that make sense?"

"It does. I know what you mean. It's one of the steps you have to take, being okay with yourself after something's happened." He looked away for a moment. "It's hard. I still can't most of the time."

"Chris, what you and Quinn went through..."

"It was bad, we won't deny it, but as bad as it was, we were—well not quite expecting it—but it was part of the deal. What happened to you was out of the blue. We were in combat. You were at an art opening."

"It's one of the reasons I want to move in before the boss does," Jensen blurted out.

"What?" Chris gave him an odd look.

"Hearing footsteps I can't identify; I need to know I'm safe here before I hear footsteps."

"I understand."

"I know you do."

"I know." Chris pulled him into a rough hug, then let him go. "Let's finish this before Quinn ruins dinner."

It was after ten when Jensen coded in the gate at the big house that night. The clouds had cleared and the stars were bright overhead. He stopped on the driveway and got out, looking up at the sky. There wasn't much light pollution on the plateau, and he could see Antares like a drop of blood hanging in the sky. There was a crescent moon rising, the light reflecting on the mountain, making it glow, ghost like, to the south. He took a deep breath, enjoying the quiet. Dinner had been busy and their last customer, a supporter of Quinn's rescue efforts, lingered to chat as they closed.

It had been hard leaving. Jensen would never deny that. It was the first night he'd really been alone since that night almost two years ago. Even when he'd been recovering in the hospital, he'd never been alone for long. His family had come in shifts to sit with him during the day, or sleep in the recliner beside the bed at night. Of course, he told himself they did that as much for themselves, but he knew, deep down, that wasn't quite true.

As he'd left tonight, his family had assured him they'd have their phones, and if he needed them they'd be there. He'd made sure they promised to call him if they needed him and then, after a few more hugs, he'd left.

He got back in the truck and headed towards the house. There was a note stuck to the door, written in a neat hand on heavy paper:

I won't use the key again, but I was asked to have these delivered to you. Welcome.—MC

Jensen opened the door and walked through the office alcove and into the main part of the apartment. An overstuffed recliner was in the living room with matching end table and coffee table. A bookshelf stood against the wall. Turning, he went to the bedroom and discovered a bed with a nightstand. There was also a small TV on the wall, the remote carefully centered on the nightstand.

He opened one of the boxes and pulled out his speaker, turned his phone to one of his streaming channels and started unpacking. It didn't take long to get his few things organized in the bedroom. He was surprised to discover one box had a complete set of bedlinens, and one of Jeff's quilts. He smiled when he found a note pinned to the quilt *Something to make it more like home-Jeff*.

When they were kids, they'd teased their father about his quilting. After a stressful day, they would find him in his chair in the living room surrounded by fabric. Jensen firmly believed he'd had his first real exposure to color theory watching Jeff choose fabric for his quilts. Over the years, they'd encouraged Jeff to enter his quilts in competitions, but he'd always declined, saying they were just his stress relief.

Jensen knew they were the way his father dealt with things, he'd found out when he was fourteen that Jeff had started quilting when he was seventeen and confined to bed with an illness that made it hard to sit up, let alone do anything else. Jeff had told him at first all he'd been able to do was shuffle cards. Once he could be propped up a little, his grandmother had brought him some squares from the quilt she was making and he'd started piecing them together.

When Jensen had been recovering after the attack and then the second surgery, Jeff had brought in bags of precut squares and even though Jensen couldn't use a needle and thread, they'd pieced the quilts together over the time in the hospital and then the months after. Since then, they would often plan a quilt together, talking about patterns and colors. Chris and Quinn would just smile—and disappear the instant the fabric appeared. They had made it very clear that quilting was not relaxing for them.

After making the bed and carefully spreading the quilt on top. Jensen wandered into the living room. He had brought several boxes of his favorite books. Even though he had an ereader,

and used it regularly, there was something comforting about paper books. He'd started using the e-reader in the hospital. It let him find books in the middle of the night when he couldn't sleep and didn't want to wake whichever family member was staying with him that night. It took a while to get the books arranged right. Chris accused him of being a little obsessive about the books, and Jensen couldn't disagree.

When the books were finished, he glanced at the clock. It was close to midnight. He really should try and get some sleep. He had planned to spend the morning finishing his unpacking and maybe getting started on the remodel of the apartment, then heading home to help with harvest and prep for dinner service. Jensen pulled a favorite book off the shelf and headed into the bedroom.

A loud jangling worked its way into his dream. Jensen opened his eyes and blinked at the unfamiliar ceiling. It took a moment for him to register where he was, then realize what had woken him. He reached for his phone and opened the text from Chris. *Get your lazy ass up, we're at the gate with food and swatches.* Jensen looked at the time. It was after eight. He got up and headed towards the box on the wall that had a switch to open the gate, then grabbed his jeans and a clean shirt. Chris was just pulling up as he opened the front door.

"Good morning, son, I hope you don't mind the intrusion," Jeff said as he hopped out of the truck.

"We brought fresh cinnamon rolls," Quinn added.

"And swatches," Chris finished.

"Swatches?" Jensen led the way inside.

"I went to the hardware store this morning while the rolls were rising," Chris said with a grin.

"I helped!" Quinn headed into the kitchen. "Where are your coffee mugs?"

"Still in the box, I didn't get to the kitchen last night."

"I'll take care of that, no problem. I'll get some coffee going too, before you say anything, we remembered to bring the coffee. You left it at home."

"We brought you a few more things too," Chris said, setting a cloth covered basket down in the kitchen and going back outside.

Jensen stood in the living room for a moment, watching his family bustle around the apartment. Chris and Jeff were bringing in a few pieces of furniture and Quinn was making coffee in his Keurig coffeemaker. The scent of the dark roasted beans filled the room, and a few minutes later, Quinn was handing him a mug of the rich brew. Jensen took a sip of the hot liquid. It felt like it went straight from his mouth to his brain, chasing the last of the fuzziness away.

"There's a moving truck out front," Jeff said, coming in with a box. "A big one."

"Luckily, I'm not expected to help move things," Jensen laughed. "I really hate moving."

"We know, which is why we're here. You took one pickup bed full of boxes. Not much to live on." Chris set a small shelf under the TV.

"I was planning on bringing more."

"Sure you were."

"I was!"

"Uh huh, we believe you too, we just thought we'd make it easier, that way you can focus on important things."

"Like destroying that cabinet in the bathroom?" Quinn asked hopefully, coming back into the room.

“That’s the first project,” Jensen said. “Then the kitchen.”

“Good, because in addition to swatches, we brought sledgehammers,” Quinn said with a happy grin. “And other tools, of course, but especially sledgehammers.”

“So we have a plan, breakfast, and then we watch Quinn destroy things.” Jeff picked up a cup of coffee and leaned against the counter.

“Sounds like a plan.” Jensen smiled, feeling more and more like this might work.

Six

Monday

Jensen was reaching for the alarm before it had a chance to go off. Monday had come faster than he’d expected. He’d spent the last two days splitting time between working on the apartment and helping out at home. Before he’d left the farm the night before, he made sure that Quinn and Chris knew which plants need harvesting in the next few days, just in case he didn’t get a chance to run home before dinner service started. Jeff had offered to take over watching the gardens for the next few weeks to let Jensen settle in his new job. They would need help soon, summer was winding to an end and everything was getting ripe at once. Jensen was already looking forward to spending time in the fields on his days off.

He rolled out of bed and wandered into the kitchen, and got the coffee brewing, before heading into the bathroom. He smiled when he turned the light on. The room was finished, and he was happy with it. It had gone from stark white tile, white walls and green accents to reddish brown flagstone tiles and warm beige walls. The ugly sink-cabinet combination had been replaced with a copper pedestal and a dark wood chest of drawers that also functioned as a small counter top. The silver towel bars and other fixtures had been replaced with brushed copper. Jensen had worried about the expense when they were planning the color combinations, but had been surprised when they’d found the sink on sale and Chris discovered the tiles on a clearance table. It looked like someone had boxes of stone tiles and several had broken, so they were marked down. There’d been enough to finish the bathroom, and Jensen could use the broken tiles as coasters.

While they were at the building supply store, they’d also purchased flooring and a new countertop for the kitchen, paint for the kitchen, living room, bedroom and office and, after asking Cohen if it was okay, stain for the wood trim throughout the apartment. The kitchen was half finished, the bamboo flooring a brown several tones darker than the beige carpet that filled the rest of the place. Jensen liked the contrast, it made the kitchen feel like a more natural part of the open floor plan than the white tile had before. They were planning to resurface the cabinets and had replaced the cheap faucet with a better one. The white refrigerator was still an eyesore and Jensen was debating what to do about it. It wasn’t new, but it didn’t look like it had been used much, so he felt bad about asking to have it replaced. It worked fine, it was just a terrible color.

His coffee had cooled to the correct temperature for drinking by the time he got back to it. He still hadn’t met his new boss, and he hadn’t seen Cohen since Saturday morning when the lawyer had shown up to check on the movers. Jensen didn’t want to start working in the main house without explicit permission, so he’d decided to start cleaning the gardens. They would need at least a couple days of work before he could even start thinking about tearing out the ugly

bushes. If he still didn't have any direction from his employer or Cohen when the gardens were clean, he planned on working on the stables. If there'd had animals at some point, he might be able to mine the manure for the gardens there, and if there was any leftover, take it too the farm.

He pulled on his gloves, got the gardening tools out of the garage, and headed into the garden that ran in front of his apartment and along one side of the house. When he turned to look at everything that needed to be done, he noticed the mountain. Somedays it looked bigger; he wasn't sure if it was the light, moisture in the air or some combination of things. Quinn claimed it was magic, and maybe that was the best explanation. There was one spot as the highway came up from the valley that, for "magic" reasons, the mountain was seemingly huge—filling the entire windshield. Quinn was even more convinced it was magic since the effect didn't replicate onto digital imagery and many a picture snapped with a phone had a disappointingly small mountain in it.

Jensen settled down in front of the garden and started pulling grass and other weeds out of the beds. He was surprised when he discovered several rose bushes. One had several tiny buds on it. He cleared the weeds from around the plants, judging by their bases they had been there a long time. The bushes had the shiny leaves that marked them as a Northwest rose, more resistant to the many diseases that plagued roses in the area. With pruning and some fertilizer, he guessed they bounce back, maybe even this year. Washington tended to have long warm autumns, and the roses at the farm typically bloomed into November.

By the time he was finished with the bed with the roses, it was past noon. He happily surveyed what he'd already achieved. As he'd explained to Jeff when they'd arrived at the farm four years ago, he liked doing that kind of work. There was something satisfying at being able to see what the hours of work had accomplished. After the injury, it felt like he'd lost everything but this kind of work and he needed it more. Seeing the tiny blooms of the rose in the sun made him smile as he went into the house to make lunch. Chris had given him tomato salad, a ball of freshly made mozzarella and a loaf of bread as he left the café the night before. Jensen dished some of the salad up, sliced the cheese and bread and carried it out to the small table they'd put on the patio under the house's huge deck.

Jensen was finishing his food when Cohen's Mercedes pulled up the drive. He watched the car wind its way from the gate. He'd carried his plate inside by the time the lawyer tapped on his door.

"I brought coffee," Cohen said by way of greeting.

"Thank you." Jensen took the proffered cup.

"One of the perks of working for a man who owns a coffee empire. You've done a lot of work in here."

"I'll finish it over the next couple of weekends."

"It looks good." The lawyer sipped his coffee. "The gardens are looking good, too."

"I wasn't sure where to start," Jensen said hesitantly.

"You picked the right spot. We might as well take advantage of the weather; it will rain soon enough." He made a face. "It always does."

"Usually in the middle of a project."

"Or the one home game you have both time and tickets for," Cohen said sourly. "Sure they closed the roof, but not soon enough."

"How much work do you want me to do on the gardens?"

"Whatever you think they need. Our employer wants them to look good."

"How does he define good?" Jensen asked curiously.

“Usually whatever he can get done without hassling with it himself. He’s busy and likes self-starters.” Cohen grinned conspiratorially. “Meaning ‘stop bothering me with that shit, and just do it yourself, Matt.’ Just change that sentence and add your name instead.”

“Okay. Should I check with you?”

“I’ll trust your instincts. The flowerbeds in front of the café at a local showplace, so I’m pretty sure you know what you’re doing.”

“I found a few old rosebushes out there, should I keep them?”

“Again, up to you. The only plant I have ever successfully kept looking good is the fake one on my desk.” The lawyer laughed. “I tried, my secretary keeps giving me plants, saying they’ll help clean the air. Over the last three years she must have given me a couple of dozen of the damn things. Even the ‘hardy, hard to kill, grow anywhere’ ones. Seriously, one came with that label on it. Poor plant lasted two months before it died. She now claims it’s my personality that kills them.”

“You’re probably overwatering them, that’s the mistake most people make with houseplants,” Jensen said.

“I’ll remember that if she ever gives me another one. She might have given up at this point. Which reminds me, if you need something and you can’t reach me, feel free to call her.” He handed Jensen a card. “She only sounds terrifying. Underneath she’s very nice. Really.”

“Thanks.”

“I’ll let you get back to work. I have to go upstairs and murder the decorator.”

“Murder?” Jensen asked with a chuckle.

“Yes. There was a hardwood floor in the room the boss wanted for an office.”

“Why murder?”

“She put a rug over it.” He sighed. “I have no idea why she thought that a garnet rug would be ‘perfect and powerful’ for the boss’s home office. He’s really not the garnet rug kind of guy at home. At work, sure, hide the blood. At home he prefers something more minimal.”

“Garnet?” Jensen couldn’t help raising an eyebrow.

“That’s what she called it, looks red to me. I just know he’ll hate it when he gets here and call me and wonder why I let that happen. So to prevent my blood from being spilled, I am going to handle that right now.”

“I am going to start tearing out those evergreen bushes, is that okay?”

“Definitely. Save me space for a body, just in case.”

“Yours?” Jensen joked.

“If that rug is still there, yes.” Cohen laughed and headed out the door.

The bushes in question were juniper, the tops a sickly yellow and the bottoms covered with dead branches and the peculiar gray-brown leaves that juniper produced when it died. Jensen generally loved growing things—all except the juniper that so many people used as groundcover and hedges in temperate climates. As far as he was concerned the whole species could disappear and the world would be a better place. When they’d first bought the farm, there had been a juniper hedge in front of the house. They’d ignored it until one night Jeff mentioned an acrid odor blowing in the front screen. It was the bushes; they had a scent which Jeff generously called “distasteful” and Chris described as “just like cat pee.” After spending three days removing the hedge and discovering the only thing that used it for a nest was rats, they’d all hated the bushes with a passion.

When Jensen had first realized what the bushes were at this house, he'd been worried if he could get them out or if the project would have to wait until the family could help. Junipers had extremely strong roots and the one at the farm had taken all four of them to remove. After noticing these plants were mostly dead, he hoped that most of the vast root system would be dead and easy to remove. If not, he could get started and then have the others over to help later in the week. He pulled out the clippers and started removing the large branches. Once they were off one bush, he gave the trunk a shove with his foot. It shifted fairly easily in the ground, and he hoped that was a sign that it would be a simple job to remove the bushes. As he finished trimming the branches from each bush, he would pause and carry the debris to the large dumpster set at the corner of the house. He could see people placing furniture in the living room of the house when he paused, and when he carried one load of stuff to the dumpster, he noticed pieces of a red rug tossed on top the other garbage.

He'd been working for a couple of hours, when Cohen drove past, waving as he went. Jensen waved back, thinking how much different the lawyer seemed compared to their first meeting. The man had a sly and almost self-deprecating sense of humor that Jensen hadn't expected in the lead counsel for the one of the Northwest's most successful and ruthless businessmen. It made him wonder a bit more about Padalecki. The businessman was a favorite topic on the pages of the local newspapers. He came from a wealthy family, although rumor had it they'd fallen on less-than-optimum times before he took over the finances. Jensen knew he owned one of only coffee companies that could compete with Starbucks and Tullys.

The light was starting to change as he finished trimming the last juniper. Sundown was still a few hours away, but it was about the time he usually quit to help with dinner service. He looked at the pile of branches left, and decided he would move them the next day. His arm and hand were starting to ache and he'd been ignoring the discomfort for longer than he should. Stripping off his gloves, he looked at his hands. No wonder his arm was sore; he'd done farm more than he'd planned for the day. Chris often chided him for losing track of the time while he was working. It could be a problem if he overworked damaged muscles.

The apartment was quiet and cool when he walked in from the garage. The smell of new paint and rugs still hung in the air, but it was less noticeable, even after being outside. After taking a shower to wash off the grunge of the day, he made himself dinner and sat down in the recliner in the living room. He watched a favorite travel show while he ate. The host was touring the art galleries of Europe and had gotten permission to see some of the art that was no longer on display. Jensen was half-doing when he thought he heard something. Blinking awake, he carried his plate into the kitchen and he heard it again. Someone was knocking at the door. He turned first to his front entrance, then realized the sound was coming from the back of the apartment.

Jensen walked to the office and looked up the stairs that lead into the house. The knocking was coming from there. Cohen had always come to the front door of the apartment, and as far as Jensen knew, there was only one other person with a key to the main house. He took a deep breath and headed up the stairs to meet his employer.

Seven

It was quiet as Jensen made his way up the stairs. They'd been re-carpeted with the rest of the apartment and the thick rug swallowed the sound of his footsteps. There was a small landing at the top of the stairs. He looked in surprise at the door. The door had a double locking system. It could be locked by latch from both sides, so that if Jensen wanted to enter the main

house, he would need to use a key, and anyone coming from the main house would need a key to enter Jensen's apartment from the house. He flipped the latch and opened the door.

"Hello?" he said, a little unsure.

"Hello," the man standing there said. He was smiling, dimples showing in his face, longish hair partially tumbling over his forehead. He was wearing a well-cut suit, the tie pulled down so the top button could be undone. The thing that struck Jensen, though, was how tall he was. "I hope it's not too late, but I wanted to introduce myself. I'm Jared Padalecki." He held out his hand.

"Jensen," he said, taking the outstretched hand. He felt a little odd introducing himself to his boss.

"Good to meet you. Would you like to come in for a cup of something warm? I know it's a little late for coffee, but we just started carrying a new drinking chocolate and I brought some home to give it a try."

"Sure." Jensen stepped into the house. He glanced around, to his left was the living room that opened onto the side of the house he'd spent the day working on. To the right was the kitchen and a short hallway that ended in two doors. Considering the size of the moving truck that had been there on Saturday, there was very little furniture in the house.

"I just found the mugs. For some reason whoever unpacked the kitchen decided to put them in the cupboard furthest from both my coffeemaker and the built in espresso bar. It was probably revenge for the carpet issue in the office I got a call about."

"Carpet issue?" Jensen asked, following him into the kitchen.

"Matt ordered a rug removed, something about 'god-awful color' and the floor was supposed to be hardwood anyway," he said as he heated water and added it to the mugs. "The decorator decided to call me." He chuckled. "Which was a mistake. I am not really the type you call to rat out my own people. Especially Matt." He handed Jensen a cup of chocolate.

"Thank you, Mr. Padalecki."

"Jared," he corrected. "I'm only Mr. Padalecki to people who are assholes, like that decorator. It was 'Jared' when she called and Mr. Padalecki' by the time we finished the conversation. I really have no idea what I was thinking when I hired a decorator, except I was hoping it would be one less thing to worry about. After the third phone call to discuss the color of tile, I should have known. I prefer working with people that get things done without bothering me about it. Which reminds me, the gardens are already looking a lot better."

"I haven't done much. I found a few roses and started on the juniper is all."

"I hate juniper, the damn stuff smells like cat pee. There was some in front of the first office I had. I made sure my lease let me take it out." He grinned. "I know it's late, but would you like to see the house? So I can get an idea of where we should start in here?"

"Okay."

"I guess she never got to these rooms, or," he frowned, "she might have asked about them, but I tuned it out." Jared led Jensen into the living room. There was a fireplace on the wall it shared with the kitchen and a wall that was made up of two-storey windows. An uncomfortable looking white leather couch sat carefully centered in the room with a coffee table in front of it and a single lamp. From there, they crossed through the entry and into a room with carriage windows filling two walls. It was empty, the white walls matching another, smaller room, that led back into the kitchen. "I think this is listed as the family room and dining room and through there is the office." He pointed down the hallway that ran behind the kitchen to a large door. "I put the office on this side so I didn't have the view."

“Why?”

“I’m easily distracted and having the mountain to look at would mean nothing would ever get done here. The master suite is on the second floor. It’s the one part of the house that’s finished. The third floor, I was thinking of making into a rec room. The big TV is up there, and a couple of chairs.” He had walked back through the kitchen and was heading up the stairs that were tucked to the side of the main entrance. “There are planters on the way to the front door. Let me know if they’re alright or if they scream ‘I have planters here because I think they look schmancy.’”

“Schmancy?”

“Technical term. Here we are.” Jared walked into the middle of the room. “One thing for sure, that has to go.” *That* was a weird wall that bisected the room, but didn’t go to the ceiling, making it look a lot like a cubicle partition. It had been painted to match the walls, but it seemed out of place. “It’s supposed to make the room more intimate, or so I was told.” He went to the other side of the wall and looked over it. “I feel like I’m in a stall in the men’s room.”

“I can have it down tomorrow if you want. Quinn and Jeff would make quick work of it. My brother and father,” he said answering Jared’s look. “They’re very good at demolition. They could come up in the morning, if you’d like?”

“Perfect. While they’re here, see if they’ll take out the cabinets in the bathroom on this floor and the main floor. I hate those things; they look like one of my mother’s dressers with a sink stuck in the middle.”

“We took the one in the apartment out and put in a pedestal, would you like me to do that?”

“You did?”

“Mr. Cohen said it was alright.”

“First of all, call him Matt, I don’t want his head to get bigger than it already is and secondly, it’s fine, I pre-approved any changes you wanted to make. Could I see what you did down there?”

“Of course,” Jensen said immediately. “I’m planning on working on the kitchen after I get done outside tomorrow. If Quinn is here, I might see if I can talk him into an hour or two.” He led the way down the stairs into the apartment. The bathroom was directly opposite the stairs, so he flipped on the light and stepped aside.

“You did all this in a couple of days?” Jared asked, walking into the small room.

“I had a lot of help. The demolition was the most work, and I just directed that. Thinking of that, let me call and see if I can get someone here tomorrow.” Jensen pulled out his phone and hit speed dial for Quinn, watching as Jared wandered out of the bathroom and into the main part of the apartment.

“Jensen? Everything okay?” Quinn answered on the first ring.

“Everything is fine. I was wondering if you would be free tomorrow to come help with some demolition in the house?”

“I’ll be there at eight?”

“That works, see you then.”

“Thanks.” Jensen broke the connection and headed into the living room.

“I really like what you’ve done in here.”

“It’s not finished.”

“Looks a hell of a lot better than the green and white. I admit I do have a certain loathing of that combination. Back when it was all the rage, my mother redecorated the entire house.

Luckily, the fad passed and she had the place redone.” Jared shook his head. “I believe I was accused of not understanding what was fashionable at some point around then. Of course that might have had something to do with the fact I put my foot down and limited decorating costs.”

“Um,” Jensen said, a little unsure.

“Sorry about that, I had a discussion with Mother today on why five thousand a month for flowers and ‘other little things a girl needs’ is a little extreme. She disagreed and bitch at me for buying that...” He stopped abruptly, turned bright red and cleared his throat. “So you will start upstairs tomorrow?”

“Quinn will be here at eight. Knowing how he works, I suspect everything will be destroyed by nine or so. Would you like me to get the sinks too?”

“What store do you use?”

“I usually go to Foothills Hardware, since it’s local.”

“Supporting local is good. I’ll open an account there and have your name on it. Get whatever you need, for down here too.”

“Any preference on color?”

“Not white.”

“Not white?”

“White sinks... Anything but white is fine.” Jared smiled. “I should let you get some rest.” He turned to leave, but seemed reluctant. “I’ll leave the door into the house unlocked. I’m not around much, feel free to use that kitchen anytime.”

“Thank you.”

“Thank you.” Jared took a breath like he was going to say something more, then shook his head. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

Tuesday

“Hey, I got goodies!” Quinn called as he came in the apartment. “Chris sent breakfast rolls, and I snagged leftovers from last night’s dinner, bread and some herbed butter.” He set a box down on the kitchen cabinet and turned to Jensen with a smile.

“You seem awfully happy about being here.”

“It’s not like I’m getting out of helping stuff nasturtium flowers for the appetizers tonight or anything. Plus, any day smashing things is a good day.”

“True. After things are cleaned up, you can help me get the new sinks, it will save you from flower duty.”

“I’ll help put them in to get out of flower stuffing detail. Do you have any idea how long it takes to stuff the damn little things without ripping them, crushing them or otherwise making them unattractive?”

“Are you here to get out of it, or did Chris tell you not to bother helping with prep?” Jensen asked with a laugh.

“Little column A, little column B,” Quinn replied. “Where are we working?”

“In the house, top floor has a wall and that floor and the main floor have bathroom cabinets to remove.”

“Walls are my favorite.”

“I know, that’s why I called you.” Jensen headed towards the stairs. “I have plastic sheets to put around the wall to minimize the mess. While you are having fun there, I’ll get the bathroom on that floor ready.”

“You’re always so organized. Hey, what’s this floor?” Quinn asked as they reached the second storey.

“Master suite. He said it’s finished.” Jensen grabbed Quinn’s sleeve as his brother veered towards the hallway to the rooms. “You can snoop after we get done upstairs, okay?”

“Fine. Spoilsport,” he said, trudging up the steps. “How big is this place?”

“Big, really big.”

“Why is there a cubicle in the middle of the room?”

“I don’t know, neither does the boss, which is why we are taking it out.”

“It might be the stupidest wall I’ve ever seen.” Quinn walked around it, then gave it a kick. “It will come out easy. I think it’s just on top the rug, so we don’t have to worry about that. Show me the bathroom, then I’ll get down to the fun part.”

Three hours later, Jensen was finishing the cleaning in the main floor bathroom, before they headed to the hardware store to get the sinks. He’d been happy to discover that the cabinets had been installed on top the tile, it made his job a lot easier, since he didn’t have to worry about matching the tile or patching the floor. It looked like the cabinets had been moved in recently, maybe as part of the “staging” for the sale. In the case of the upstairs bathroom, they’d been surprised when they realized that the water had never been hooked up to the sink. Quinn had muttered something about always trying fixtures, then set to work. As usual cleaning took more time than the actual demolition and Quinn had done most of the heavy stuff while Jensen swept and mopped.

When he got back in the house from carrying the final bag of garbage to the dumpster Quinn was nowhere to be seen. Jensen sighed. His brother was no doubt “exploring” the house. Quinn had been checking out various parts of the house every time he carried something out to the garbage. Which was why Jensen wasn’t surprised he was missing now. The house was big, but it wasn’t that big, and when he thought about it, he hadn’t seen his brother for almost half an hour.

“Quinn? You better not be in the master suite,” Jensen said, walking up the stairs.

“I think it’s a library or den or something. I didn’t go into the bedroom. You better come here,” he said, appearing on the landing.

“What’s wrong?” He stopped. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“I have. You need to see this.” Quinn headed down the hallway, stopping and opening a door about halfway down the corridor. “It’s... I...”

“What is wrong with you?” Jensen demanded, pushing past Quinn. He stopped dead as he walked into the room. His brain registered bookcases on the walls and furniture, but heart started slamming against his ribs and his hands and right arm started aching. He felt a hand on his shoulder, but all he could do was try and control his breathing as he looked at the painting that dominated one entire wall.

“*The Mountain Before the Storm*,” Quinn said, his voice barely above a whisper.

It was the last piece Jensen had done before the attack; the last piece he’d finished before he’d lost everything. He’d only agreed to sell it because the gallery had received an offer that, with the massive medical bills from the attack and then the infection, he had to accept.

“What’s it doing here?” he asked, turning to Quinn helplessly. “What’s it doing here?”

Eight

It was a spring night, a soft drizzle was covering the city reflecting lights like gems embedded on buildings and pavement. The lights from the small, exclusive gallery were a bright splash of color washing on the pavement as Jensen stepped outside to get a breath of fresh air and collect himself before he had to give his speech. It was his most important showing ever, the gallery was the pinnacle of the art scene in the area, with patrons who were a mix of old money and new. Those people were now crowding into the space, the men's dark suits contrasting with bright gowns, as they milled around looking at the paintings.

He could see his family moving through the crowd, smiles on their faces, in fact Jeff was talking to someone gesturing towards a large painting. The Mountain Before the Storm had been finished just two weeks ago and now occupied the place of honor in the gallery. Jensen loved the piece, and knew it was special as he painted it. There were only one or two other works that had felt that special as he created them. Even so, this one was different. As he looked at it, he couldn't find any of the little imperfections he usually could when evaluating his own art. With a happy sigh, he turned to head back into the gallery.

"Hey," Quinn's voice interrupted the memory.

Jensen blinked, the street falling away. "I'm..."

"Don't say okay, because I can see your face and you are so far from okay it's not funny. I know the look too, so don't disagree." He pulled him out the door. "I had no idea how to break it gently. Let's go downstairs and have a cup of coffee, we can have some waiting for Jeff and Chris when they get here."

"When they get here?" Jensen snapped, surprised at the anger in his voice.

"Rule One: Family deals with all shit together, end of statement."

"We have work to do," he said as he followed his brother down to the apartment.

"I'm declaring a lunch break, we can have coffee and then go get whatever we need to finish." Quinn pulled four mugs out of the cupboard. "And after we talk."

"I'm not even sure what to talk about."

"Why it's here for one thing," Chris said, walking in the door.

"Do you ever knock?" Jensen grumbled.

"Not usually," he said with a smile. "First cup's yours, you look like shit," he said, taking a mug from Quinn and handing it to Jensen. "Yours is brewing, Jeff."

"Thanks. How are you?" Jeff asked, giving Jensen a long look.

"I'm not sure," Jensen answered honestly. "I never thought I'd see it again. What's it doing here?" He was caught between curiosity and anger.

"Good question. Until we find out, I think you should move home," Chris said. "We can have you packed in a couple of hours."

"No!"

"He has a point," Quinn said, frowning.

"No!" Jensen repeated, aware of his growing anger.

"We still don't know why it happened, Jensen, maybe it would be better for you to come home." Jeff was trying to be reasonable, but it just upped the tension.

"Shit! I hadn't even really thought about that. You *are* coming home with us." Chris set his cup down and turned towards the bedroom.

“Stop!” Jensen shouted, then took a breath when they all looked at him in surprise. “I really doubt my employer is the one who attacked me and destroyed my career.”

“He could have hired someone,” Quinn said.

“You watch too much bad TV,” Jensen snapped.

“What about that lawyer guy,” Quinn asked, narrowing his eyes.

“Does he have enough money?” Chris mused.

“Those suits aren’t cheap.”

“I am not leaving,” Jensen said defensively. “I’m here for our land, remember?”

“Son, we will figure something else out, let us make sure you’re safe.”

“Jeff,” he turned to his father, “the reason I’m here hasn’t changed, my need to help hasn’t changed just because the painting is here. I…” He met Jeff’s eyes, silently begging him to understand.

“You sold it so we could keep the family together, Jensen.”

“Doesn’t it even bother you?” Chris asked, his voice angry.

Jensen saw the instant he said it, he regretted it, but it was too late. “Bother me? Bother me that the last thing I could ever create before I fucking died is here? And now you want me to throw away the very thing I gave up? If you let the land go, selling the painting means NOTHING!” He stormed out of the apartment, and stood by the roses, his breathing harsh, tears burning in his eyes.

“Jensen.” Jeff’s voice was gentle.

“I’m sorry,” he said, trying to talk around the pain. “I don’t regret selling it.”

“But?”

“I can’t let it mean nothing. I didn’t even realize that until this second, but if we lose the land, it means nothing.”

“No, it doesn’t. When you agreed to sell it, we didn’t even know this issue would come up.”

“Right, and now that it has, if I can’t give you this, *that* means nothing.”

“You’re hurting, son, what you’re saying is not making a lot of sense,” Jeff said, putting an arm over his shoulders.

“I’ve felt useless for a long time,” he confessed quietly.

“Useless? The gardens? The café? That’s useless?”

“A few plants and flower arrangements?” Jensen asked bitterly.

“You know it’s far more than that. Why haven’t you mentioned this before?”

“It only hits me really hard now and then, and I go do something that I can see accomplishes something concrete—like fixing the fences or harvesting for dinner service—and I feel better.” He took a deep breath and met his father’s eyes. “It’s my fault we almost lost it all.”

“What?” Jeff looked shocked.

“The attack, I should…”

“Don’t even start that, Jensen. It was not your fault; you could not have done anything to stop it. We’ve been through this before.”

“But…”

“No buts. We would happily lose everything to have you here with us. Everything.”

“I know, and that’s why it I need to do this.” Jensen wondered if that even made sense.

“What about the rest of it?”

“There’s no reason to attack me again, it’s over. We don’t even know if whoever bought it from the gallery had anything to do with the attack. Please, Jeff.”

Jeff stood silently for several minutes. “Okay, for now. But if anything even the slightest out of the ordinary happens, I am sending your brothers in to settle it.”

“That’s fair,” he agreed with a soft laugh. “Thank you.”

The kitchen was filled with the scent of baking bread. There was something comforting in the smell and Jensen needed it that evening. He’d decided to take Jared up on the offer of the kitchen in the main house. The apartment didn’t have an oven and the bread was really better warm. The pasta was warming on the stove and Jensen was sitting at the island, watching the colors play on the mountain as the sun set.

Even though it felt like a long day, he was pleased with what he’d gotten done in the house. After his talk with Jeff and a further discussion with the whole family, Chris had calmed down enough to stop pacing and listen to reason. At least Jensen hoped that was what had happened. He wouldn’t actually be surprised if one of his brothers started showing up daily to “help”. In fact, Quinn had made appoint of reminding him that part of the deal was help on big projects. Shortly after that, Jeff and Chris had returned to the farm to start on prep for dinner. Jensen and Quinn had headed to the hardware store and picked up what they needed to finish their projects for the day. Despite the earlier excitement, it had been a comfortable afternoon of work and at the end, Jensen felt good about all they’d accomplished. It helped the little ache that was always there gnawing at him.

The sound of the door opening startled him. Jensen glanced down the hall, Jared was coming in from the garage. “I don’t care, Matt, I’m tired of dealing with it. Settle it once and for all.” He paused for a moment. “Exactly. You know the rule. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.” He took the phone away from his ear and seemed to fold in on himself.

“I’m sorry, I thought I’d be done before you got here,” Jensen said, letting him know someone was in the house.

“Hello,” Jared replied, a smile lighting his face. “I said you could use the kitchen anytime.” He stood in the door for a moment, looking for all the world like he was nervous. “I’ll, uh, I’ll head upstairs so you can finish.”

“I was almost finished,” Jensen said at almost the same time. “Would you like some? Chris sent more than I could eat, I even have a whole loaf of bread.”

“Really? Thanks!” He stepped into the kitchen. “It smells amazing.”

“Chris makes the bread from scratch every day. We have this very terrifying mother burbling away all the time.” Jensen realized what he’d said, and how odd that had to have sounded. “The sourdough starter is call the ‘mother’.”

“Oh, good,” Jared laughed, then frowned. “It burbles?”

“It really does. The first time Quinn noticed it doing that, he tried to throw it out. He couldn’t decide if it was possessed or had gone bad.” He chuckled remembering the look on his brother’s face.

“I’m pretty sure I’d think the same thing,” he said, getting plates and glasses out of the cupboard. He set them on the island, then turned to the refrigerator. “Is sparkling water okay? I haven’t had the chance to really get the fridge stocked and I have this or coffee. Believe it or not, I’ve never gotten used to drinking coffee with any meal except breakfast. Don’t get me wrong, I’ll drink coffee pretty much all day, just not with a meal.”

“I know I drink more than I probably should. Jeff claims if we put in the espresso bar Quinn keeps talking about, I’ll drink them out of business.”

“Can I help with anything else?”

“Everything is about ready.” Jensen checked the bread and pulled it out of the oven. “You can slice the bread, if you’d like, I’ll get the rest of it. The blue container has herb butter in it. Chris makes it from scratch too, the herbs are from the café garden.”

“Chris is your...?”

“Brother.” Jensen set the dish of pasta on the island and sat down opposite Jared.

“And Jeff and Quinn? If you don’t mind me asking?”

“Father and brother,” he replied.

“I saw all your names on the contract and I was curious. It’s not often I run across a piece of land with that many owners without a corporation backing them up. So, you all own the land equally?”

“We do.” Jensen waited for a moment, when Jared didn’t say anything, he continued. “We divide up the workload. Chris runs the café, Quinn is in charge of the rescue, Jeff handles the books.”

“And you? What do you do there?”

Jensen shrugged. “Whatever needs to be done.”

“Like?” Jared seemed genuinely curious.

“I fix things and help muck out the stables. I water the plants, and I guess I am sort of in charge of the gardens. We usually all help prep for dinner service.”

“The gardens in front of the café? You planted those?”

“With help.”

“They’re something to see, even from the road as I drive past.” He frowned. “I thought you said the herbs were from the gardens? The ones in front are all flowers.”

“The herb garden is behind the buildings. We have herbs and edible flowers.”

“Edible flowers? Jared raised his eyebrows. “Like squash blossoms?”

“Yes and no. Edible like that, but not squash. Right now it’s nasturtiums. Chris said he was going to stuff them as appetizers. He uses the leaves in salads sometimes.”

“I didn’t even think they were edible. What else?”

“Dill and chives, of course, and pansies, lavender, red clover, carnations...”

“Carnations are edible? You’re kidding.”

“No, actually they were used in place of cloves in the Middle Ages. Chris has been experimenting with them. We made the mistake of getting him a book on the ‘history of flavorings’.” Jensen smiled as he remembered his brother’s enthusiasm over the book.

“What kind of herbs do you grow?”

“Basil, cilantro, mints, fennel, rosemary, thyme and chives. We have garlic too, I got it in last fall, so we should have a good harvest this year.”

“How much of your own stuff do you use at the café?”

“As much as possible. Chris plans a seasonal menu and we grow most of the greens and tomatoes. This year I tried peppers and eggplant as well. I’d like to put in some berries on the land to the west of the house, maybe raspberries, but right now we get fruit from a farm in Orting. I think Chris is hoping Quinn will rescue some chickens so we can have our own eggs.”

“You don’t have chickens?” Jared prompted.

“Not yet. Horses and a llama. At least as of yesterday, there’s always a chance Quinn will pick up a stray on his way home. That’s how we ended up with the llama. Chris and Quinn were coming back from Eastern Washington—they’d been over to rescue a draft horse—and they found a starving llama wandering along the highway. It was out in the middle of nowhere, they looked for a farm or even just a house, that he might have come from, but they never found one

so they brought him home. He's been guarding the place since. Llamas make remarkably good guard animals."

"Have you always lived on a farm?"

"No, we had a little land in..." Jensen stopped when he realized he'd been talking for more about himself than usual.

"Where?"

"The southwest."

"Why did you move here?" Jared asked as he finished his food.

"My brothers couldn't live in the desert anymore. They served overseas."

"What did you do before you moved here?"

Jensen's hand was aching. He rubbed it, suddenly uncomfortable with the conversation. Jared had been very carefully interrogating him. "Not much. Odds and ends."

"Odds and ends?" Jared frowned and took a breath like he was about to add something.

"I should go, um, I have to start early," he said, then blushed when he thought about who he was talking to. It was hard to use the "starting early" excuse when you were talking to your employer.

"Of course. Thank you for sharing your food with me." He carried their plates to the sink.

"You're welcome." Jensen stood. "We finished the bathrooms today, what would you like us to do next?"

"Why don't you finish the gardens. I'm not sure what I want to start in here, and I am out of town on business for the next couple of days," he replied, his voice completely changed from the conversation a few moments before. "Make sure you take care of those planters on the front entrance. If they look like shit, toss them and make it look better. If they're okay, but the plants are shit, toss those. Get whatever plants you need to get the gardens in shape."

"I will." Jensen was a little surprised at the change in the man. "I'll see you when you get back." He walked towards the door to his apartment.

"I..." Jared paused when his phone rang, pulling it out and scowling at it. "Excuse me" he nodded a dismissal and Jensen stepped on to his stairs. Jared stood and stepped away. "What?" Jensen heard him snap. "No, don't even start with me. It's done. Don't push your luck." Jensen paused on the steps, listening. Jared's voice had altered even further, now it was an angry hiss. "If you interfere again you will be dealing with my lawyer, do you understand?" There was a pause. "You'd be surprised, he's scarier than you know," he said with a humorless chuckle. "Let me make this clear, you leave this alone or you will have far worse than Cohen to deal with." Jared's voice sent a chill up Jensen's spine. He suddenly understood why Jared was one of the most feared business men in the Northwest.

Before Jared could catch him eavesdropping, he closed the door and headed to his apartment. Maybe the stress of the day was getting to him, but when he reached the bottom of the stairs, he slipped back up and locked the door, sliding the security latch into place. Something in Jared's voice had been terrifying. It was almost too much. Knowing he would be gone for a few days seemed like a relief. He laughed at himself as he sat down to watch TV, there had been nothing scary in the man he'd shared dinner with and he was overreacting because of everything that had happened. That's when the cold realization curled through his chest. *Everything* that happened that day included finding his painting on the second floor of the house and Jared's careful interrogation at dinner. What exactly did his employer want from him? And more to the point, did he know who Jensen was?

Those questions kept him awake far into the night.

Nine

Saturday

The sun was still high in the sky when Jensen pulled into the driveway at the farm. It was the end of his first week working at the house, and he was headed home for his one and a half days off. Saturdays were usually the busiest dinner services, and he had planned to be there to help. He was looking forward to being home. He missed his family and there was a lot to catch up on, even though one of them had been at the house almost every day to “help” with the projects Jensen was working on.

He'd actually needed the help to remove the last of the junipers from the beds. The first had come out so easily, he'd assumed they would all be that simple to remove. He started work on them first thing in the morning after he'd had the meal with Jared. It was still early, but he was restless and had headed out to work before he'd eaten breakfast. After attempting to remove the third stump for what felt like hours, he'd been debating calling his family for help when Chris had phoned to say he was on the way over. They'd worked on getting the flower beds ready for planting until Chris had needed to leave to start cooking for the café.

That evening as he was finishing dinner, Matt had knocked on the door to see how things were progressing. Jensen had taken the lawyer out and showed him what he'd done and explained what he planned to do the next day. He also told him that Jared had asked to have something done with the planters at the front entrance. Jensen wanted to discard the ugly Renaissance-style cement planters and replace them with something more contemporary that went better with the style of the house. Matt had immediately agreed, admitting he'd hated them at first sight and had “told the boss, but he doesn't trust my design skills.”

Thursday he'd started out at the hardware store and hadn't been surprised to discover Jeff waiting at the gate when he'd returned to the house. His father had helped him get rid of the cement planters, install the new ones and get everything ready in the beds. Chris had sent sandwiches for lunch, and they shared them as they walked out to the stable on the property and looked to see what needed to be done. Before Jeff had left, Jensen had assured him he would be fine working on the gardens alone the next day. His father had been resistant at first, but finally reluctantly agreed.

It had been a relief to work on the gardens alone on Friday. Jensen was used to being around his family, and he loved spending time with them, but at home he spent at least half the day working on something by himself. Before the attack, he'd spent entire days painting and would only head home when it was time to help get things ready for dinner at the café. He spent most of the day Friday with his hands happily in the dirt. He'd paused to watch a pair of hummingbirds fighting over a wild honeysuckle vine that wound around one of the trees at the edge of the yard, when he'd spotted Matt's Mercedes on the way up the drive. The lawyer had brought coffee and had stayed for more than an hour to talk about the gardens and other projects for the property.

“Hey! You're early,” Quinn called from the walkway that ran between the café and the house as Jensen parked.

“Not really,” Jensen said, hopping out of his truck and heading to where his brother was waiting by the door of the café. “I got all the plants in, and didn't want to start something new, since I have a day off.”

“Day off being a relative term of course, since the tomatoes have gone wild in the last couple of days and there are more than I can manage in one day. Jeff’s been trying to keep up on the herbs.” Quinn clapped him on the back. “You’re either a wizard or we’re hopeless, we can’t stay ahead of things.”

“I’m not a wizard,” Jensen said with a sly smile.

“You saying I’m hopeless?” He laughed. “You’re right! I think I’ve admitted I am useless in gardens without careful direction. Even with the birds’ help I am behind and Chris said something about eggplant tonight too. I already have a couple baskets out there.”

Jensen headed around the building towards the gardens. Quinn was right, there was a lot to harvest before it was past its prime. They would need at least Jeff’s help. He felt a little guilty for not coming home to help, but he’d been tired after working at the house all day and his family had told him repeatedly to take the week to settle in before trying to help at the farm as well as work fulltime at the house. “We’re going to need Jeff and Chris.”

“Right!” Quinn turned and walked towards the café.

Jensen took the time to walk slowly through the plants. The yellow-orange Sungold tomatoes had all ripened at once, and the vines were heavy with fruit. He knew that Chris liked a mix of colors for his tomato salad, but it would have to be heavy on the orange ones to take advantage of the harvest before they were overripe. Leaving the tomatoes, he wandered into the eggplant patch, there would be enough for a full dinner service tonight, and judging by the rich purple and white fruits, they would be able to feature eggplant for several days to come. The basil was well trimmed, but several plants had set blossoms and one whole row of cilantro had gone to seed. Jensen made a mental note to remind his family not to cut the blooms—now that it was flowering, he would let it go to seed and harvest it as coriander once it was ready.

“So what needs to be done, Boss?” Chris said, giving him a one armed hug.

“Why don’t you take care of the eggplant? You know how much you’ll need for tonight. We have a lot of Sungold tomatoes, how many can you use?”

“If I make a fresh tomato salad, will there be enough left over for roasted eggplant, tomatoes and lentils?”

“Definitely, for tomorrow too,” Jensen assured him.

“Good! I’d like basil, chives, cilantro and oregano,” Chris said. “And some chive flowers and nasturtiums too. Flowers and leaves if there are enough. They look good in the fresh greens. I harvested greens this morning, but didn’t have time to get the flowers.”

“I’ll take care of the herbs, if Jeff and Quinn can handle the tomatoes.”

“Oh hurrah, tomatoes again,” Quinn said sourly as he and Jeff joined them.

“How many do you want?” Jeff asked.

“Harvest a basket each,” Jensen instructed. “Heavy on the Sungolds, but everything else needs picking too.”

“I’ll take the purple ones!” Quinn grabbed a basket.

“The ‘birds’ like that kind the best.” Jeff laughed and picked up a basket, heading towards one of the rows tomatoes.

Jensen took his basket and walked into the herb patch. The lavender was full of bees. Honeybees and bumblebees buzzed from flower to flower. Often when Jensen came out in the morning, he would find the fat black bumblebees sleeping in the flowers. They seemed to prefer lavender, and in early summer, the peonies that filled the garden under the house window. He purposefully chose plants the bees preferred and it was their preference that had saved the ugly bush behind the house. He’d nearly taken it out the first spring they’d lived there, until he

realized it was one of the very first things to bloom and was always full of bees. Taking a deep breath, he'd happily set to work.

It took nearly two hours to get everything harvested for dinner. Chris had gone in after forty minutes to start prep. Quinn had already carried one basket full of tomatoes in and was close to filling his second when Jensen finished with the herbs and went to help with the rest. When they finished, Jensen sent Jeff and Quinn to the café with the baskets and he headed to the flower garden to gather enough to replace the bouquets in the entry and on the tables. He spent half an hour choosing what he wanted and, once satisfied with his choice, carried the flowers into the front of the café and walked into the kitchen to get the vases.

"What?" Jensen demanded when everyone fell silent the instant he walked into the room.

"We have a reservation for dinner," Quinn finally admitted.

"And? We usually do."

"The lawyer guy called," he continued as if Jensen hadn't spoken. "Cohen. He and your new boss are coming tonight."

"They are?"

"I can call them back and tell them we don't have room."

"Why would you do that?" Jensen asked, looking at his family.

"No reason," Jeff answered quickly and shared a look with Quinn and Chris. "No reason at all."

"If you're okay with it," Chris said, meeting Jensen's eyes for a moment.

"Of course," he replied, but wondered at the look of concern on their faces.

It was busy at the café. Jensen had been pressed into service to help wait tables and run food when Millie, their waitress, had called in sick. He didn't mind, he enjoyed interacting with the customers and often helped out on busy nights. Business had been steady since they opened at five with their usual collection of regulars early in the evening. Jensen had just stepped back in after a break, when he heard the bell on the door chime. He headed into the foyer to greet the guests and found Jared and Matt there.

Jared was looking at the painting on the wall, a frown on his face. Jensen paused for a moment in the door, remembering the look of concern on his family's faces. He'd actually forgotten the painting was there. There was a little chill of worry in his chest, but he doubted his employer would realize *The Mountain Before the Storm* and the painting in the café were by the same artist. It was one of only two he'd ever painted that included anything manmade. The piece on the wall, *Autumn Road*, had been painted the first fall in the Northwest. The variety of maples that lined the streets and highways created a spectacular display every year. Jensen had been enchanted by the riot of color and couldn't resist the urge to capture them on canvas.

"Good evening," he said, picking up two menus.

"Hey," Jared said, turning from the picture. "We're a little early, I hope that's okay."

"Your table is ready." Jensen smiled and led the way into the dining room to the table in the back corner.

"Thanks," Matt said, sitting down.

"Would you like something to drink before you order?"

"Iced tea is fine," Jared said before Jensen could get to their wine list.

"I'll be right back." Jensen handed them the menus and went to get their drinks.

"What'd they order?" Quinn pounced on him as soon as he got into the kitchen.

"Iced tea."

“What? We have the best wine on the plateau,” he said, sounding offended.

“He ordered before I could even get to the list.”

“That’s weird.” Quinn narrowed his eyes. “Why didn’t he want wine?”

“You asked him,” Jensen replied, then grabbed his brother’s sleeve as he stepped towards the door. “I was kidding. Go help Chris.” The menus were already carefully set on the table when he returned. He smiled. “Are you ready to order? Our daily special includes a mixed heirloom tomato salad,” he said automatically, trying to ignore the intense look Jared was casting his way.

“Like the leftovers from the other night?” Jared asked.

“Yes, the tomatoes are from our gardens.”

“We’ll have that, then,” he said.

“I’ll bring your salads out.” As he walked away, he heard Matt ask, “the other night?” Jensen missed Jared’s answer as he walked in the kitchen.

By the time Jared ordered dessert, the entire family had managed to serve them at least once. Quinn had been first, nearly knocking Jensen over when he raced to refill the iced tea. Jeff had carried their entrees out when Jensen was busy with another table and Chris had drifted into the dining room to talk to people about the food. At least that had been his excuse and he had made a point of stopping at two tables before he headed to the one in the corner. Jensen got their desserts before Quinn could. He didn’t want his new boss to think he was avoiding him. There were already coffees on the table, Quinn must have been by with those, he was walking through the café with the pot in his hand.

“This is good coffee.” Jared set his cup down when Jensen reached the table. “Didn’t you say something about wanting to put in an espresso bar?”

“We’ve talked about it. It’s really Quinn’s plan,” he answered honestly. “He thinks it would bring in a little extra for the rescue.”

“The rescue?” Matt asked. “The horses?”

“And a few other things,” Quinn said from behind Jensen. “We get a lot of things donated, but having cash flow would help a lot. Especially...”

“What?” Jensen couldn’t suppress the sigh that escaped him.

“I got a call, we’re going to get one on Monday.” He grinned enthusiastically. “An American Cream, it’s the only American draft breed,” he explained with a wave of his hands.

“Do you pay for them?” Matt asked curiously.

“Usually just whatever the gas costs to get the trailer there. I’m kind of the last resort for them. Most of them are in bad shape and a lot of people don’t have the time to help them, especially if they probably won’t ever be working horses in any real way,” Quinn answered. “Two of ours can pull a plow, and we take them to break the land on a couple of farms in the spring as part of special events. We get a share of the ticket sales, but it’s not really hard work, it’s all for show. The kids love it though.”

“How many horses do you have?”

“It feels like a herd some days, we just got a little guy last week. He’s terrified of everyone but me. I’m hoping he’ll calm down; I was hoping to start a couple of volunteers.” He glanced at Jensen. “The VFW called, they were wondering if we needed help. They have two guys who came back, and it’s rough for them. I’d like to help, I know what they’re going through, you know?”

“I think that’s great!” Jensen beamed at his brother.

“Do you mean PTSD?” Jared asked with a thoughtful frown.

“Yes, working with animals can really help. I just read about a program working with wild horses,” Quinn told Jared and Matt. “It can be the difference between life and death some days.” He cleared his throat. “Sorry, enjoy your dessert.” He turned and quickly left.

Jensen watched his brother’s retreat with concern. He excused himself, and headed into the kitchen to check on him. Chris was standing by the door, Jeff and Quinn were nowhere to be seen. “Is everything okay?” Jensen asked, trying not to betray his worry.

“He just needed a minute. Jeff’s with him, it’s okay,” Chris turned to him. “What happened?”

“He was talking about working with animals.”

“Ah, that makes sense.” Chris smiled. “He’ll be okay. Table five is waiting for their dessert, can you run it out?”

“Sure.”

By the time Jensen had delivered the plates and refilled coffees around the dining room, Jared waved him over to ask for the check. He dropped the check off and went in to the kitchen to check to see if Quinn was back. Jeff was there, talking to Chris and assured Jensen his brother was okay and was sitting with the new pony. Since Quinn would often sit with the animals when he was feeling stress, Jensen’s niggle of worry disappeared. He headed back into the dining room with a smile on his face.

“Can I get you anything else?” he asked when he returned to Jared and Matt.

“No, thank you. My compliments to the chef.” Jared looked towards the kitchen. “Is your brother okay?”

“He’s out with the new rescue, he’ll be okay in a bit. Sometimes he needs to...” Jensen trailed off.

“Get away from people? Yeah, we understand,” Matt said with a sad sigh. Jared nodded in agreement.

“Thank you,” Jensen said, not sure what else to say, the moment felt awkward for some reason.

“Keep the change.” Jared stood and handed Jensen the folder with the check in it. “We’ll see you tomorrow.”

Jensen watched them go. They stopped in the foyer, in front of the painting for several minutes before they left.

Sunday

The smell of brewing coffee woke Jensen. He rolled over and looked at the clock. It was almost seven. He slid out of bed, dressed and headed downstairs. The family was already gathered around the kitchen table.

“Good morning,” he said, walking into the room. “You should have got me up earlier.”

“You needed your sleep,” Jeff said, pouring him a cup of coffee. “You don’t think we missed the fact you were up a lot of the night?”

“Sorry, my hands were aching.” Jensen sat down and took the coffee.

“You’re working too hard over there,” Chris grumbled.

“I’m fine. How are you, Quinn?”

“Better, and the horses enjoyed the extra company.” He grinned. “I heard you got one hell of a tip.”

“Uh,” Jensen felt blood rush to his cheeks.

“You should have seen his face when he went to put the money in the till and discovered two hundreds in there with the check.” Chris was laughing at him.

“I can’t believe I missed it!” Quinn was laughing too.

“Oh ha ha,” Jensen said sourly, then grinned at his brothers. “I’m sure he was leaving some for everyone, since you all managed to stop by the table at least twice.”

“True, but how often do we get the chance to check out The Beast?” Chris asked.

“He wasn’t what I was expecting,” Jeff added thoughtfully. “I’m not sure what I was expecting, but that wasn’t it.” He chuckled and shook his head. “What’s on the schedule for today?”

“Jensen is planning on taking it easy until he has to go back to the house,” Quinn said before he could say anything.

“The tomatoes…” Jensen began.

“That sounds like a good plan.” Jeff held up his hand to stop any objections. “You can let your hands rest before you go back to work. We can harvest what needs to be done.”

“But,” he said, then stopped when he saw the look on his father’s face. Ignoring the small ache of uselessness that always happened when he had to rest because of the damage to his hands, he summoned a smile. “I’ll check on the herbs and see what needs to be done in those beds while you work on the tomatoes.”

“After breakfast. I saved some of the sponge from last night, and we are having sourdough waffles this morning,” Chris said, pulling a bowl out of the fridge.

Jensen leaned back in his chair, content to watch his brother preparing breakfast. They generally took time over their morning meal on Sundays. It was the one day the café was closed, so they used the time to catch up on the week and plan what was coming. Jeff would bring out the books and they’d discuss where they were, and what needed to be done, and then they would all head into the gardens to get a head start on things for the next week.

They were lingering over their coffee when someone tapped on the back door. Jensen got up to answer it and was surprised to discover Matt was standing there. “Hello,” he said cautiously.

“Good morning. I hate to bother you on your day off, but the boss asked me to come by,” Matt said, smiling. “I’m glad you’re all here, will you come out front.”

“Why?” Chris snapped.

“The boss couldn’t be here, he had family business to attend to.” The lawyer had a look of distaste on his face, but it cleared so quickly, Jensen thought he might have imagined it. “But he wanted this delivered as soon as possible.”

“Wanted what delivered?” Jeff walked to the door.

“After speaking with you last night, the boss wanted to do this,” Matt continued as if Jeff hadn’t spoken. “Come with me.” Matt stepped off the back porch and walked around the house. There was a delivery truck sitting in front of the restaurant. He led the way over to the truck. “The boss would like to invest in the rescue.” He opened the cargo bay. “It’s used, but it’s been completely refurbished and up to our standards for one of our retail shops.”

“What?” Quinn asked as he looked in the truck.

“It’s everything to get your espresso bar going,” Matt said.

“We can’t accept this.” Jeff’s voice was stern.

“Once you mentioned you were not only rescuing the animals, but helping vets…” He looked uncomfortable. “It’s a personal request on our part.”

“What do you mean?” Jensen stepped up beside his father.

“We lost someone,” Matt said, his face sad. “He served and made it home in one piece—physically at least. He’d been home six months when...” He stopped and looked away, his eyes bright.

“Suicide?” Quinn asked.

“Yeah.” He cleared his throat.

“Thank you.” Quinn stepped forward and held out his hand to the lawyer.

“No,” Matt said, taking his hand. “Thank you.”

Ten

Sunday

It was the golden hour, the world looked like it was washed in soft yellows and oranges. The fence along the road appeared gilded as Jensen turned his pickup onto the driveway for the house. He stopped to type in the gate code and looked across to the fields that bordered the farm. He could see Freya and Odin out playing, chasing each other more like tiny kittens than enormous horses. He’d learned over the last few years that a lot of his assumptions about horses were wrong. Most of his ideas had been formed from movies and TV, and it turned out that was only a small piece of what horses were like, they played, they pouted, they teased and they were incredibly affectionate.

As he pulled up to the house, he noticed the newly-planted flowers in the beds where he’d taken out the junipers were drooping a little. There was an irrigation system surrounding the house, so they should have enough water. He’d have to check the system, maybe it was something as simple as the timer not working correctly. Honestly, he hoped it would be that simple, he didn’t like the idea of having to dig up the lines or something similar to find the problem. There was a standard faucet outside and a hose in the garage, and he decided he would use that and worry about the irrigation in the morning. He pulled the truck into the garage, grabbed the hose and headed out to the gardens.

He was well rested after his day at home and the ache in his hands that had kept him up a lot of the night was better as well. His family had lectured him at length during lunch about over-using his hands and right arm, and he had spent the time defending his actions. They’d been there a lot of the week and he hadn’t been doing anything that unusual. He told them more than once he had no idea why it was worse than usual, finally he’d fallen back on “the weather may be changing” as an excuse. It tended to be the only one that would get him off the hook because Chris’s leg ached when the weather changed.

Jensen noticed one of the roses was blooming and the other two bushes had new buds. He carefully watered them and pulled a few small blades of from their bases. They needed food and he’d brought a bucket of his homemade fertilizer from the farm to use to enrich the soil. He hadn’t realized how depleted the ground was until he was putting in the plants on the neighboring bed. He’d purchased commercial food for the flowers, but he preferred his mix. It seemed to make for healthier plants and brighter blooms. He was considering fetching the bucket to put a little around the roses when he heard footsteps behind him. His heart started accelerating.

“Hello!” Jared called.

Jensen took a slow breath, calming the reaction as he turned towards his boss with a smile. “Hello.”

“Isn’t it your day off?”

“Tell that to the plants,” Jensen said, gesturing towards the garden and trying to ignore the little *thump* in his chest that had nothing to do with a potential panic attack. It was the first time he’d seen Jared dressed casually, in jeans and a t-shirt. It was impossible not to notice his strong forearms and how the clothes made him look younger somehow. The bright smile just accentuated the overall effect. Jensen took another slow breath.

“No respect for Sundays?”

“None at all.”

“I wanted to tell you the gardens look good and the planters in front—I never realized how bad they looked until I came home and they weren’t there.”

“That style didn’t really suit the house, it made it unbalanced,” Jensen agreed.

“The new ones look great.” Jared stopped beside him. “Any chance they’ll ever look as good as the ones at your café?”

“No reason they shouldn’t. I brought some of my fertilizer from home, that should help a lot.”

“You can buy whatever you need,” Jared reminded him.

“I know, and I did buy some at the store, but this is my own, um, mix.”

“What’s in it?”

“Coffee and llama sh... droppings.”

“Coffee and llama shit? Really?” Jared looked unconvinced.

“Best stuff I’ve ever found. It worked better than the commercial stuff, especially for the flowers, and it seems to work in any kind of soil—acidic, alkaline—doesn’t matter.”

“If you need more coffee, let me know. I have access to a lot.” He laughed and it was the kind of laugh you had to join with, happy and carefree.

“Speaking of coffee,” Jensen said after the laughter faded. “I want to thank you for the...”

“Don’t,” Jared held up a hand to stop him. “Matt told you why, didn’t he?”

“He said you lost someone.”

“We did.” Jared looked away. “We met in college. Corey was one of those guys that was the life of the party. He was always doing something to cause trouble. Spring semester of our freshman year, he ended up paying for a dorm window because he threw his alarm clock out the window—but forgot it wasn’t open. He spent most of his time at university on probation for something. He was a prankster and he had this joy of life.” Jared smiled wistfully as the words poured out of him. “When we were sophomores, he convinced us to take social dance for our phys ed requirement because he’d heard the class had a shortage of guys. Halfway through our junior year, he ran afoul of a new professor and got himself expelled for “inappropriate conduct.”

“What did he do?” Jensen asked.

“Told the prof to fuck off, in exactly those words, and since he was already on probation and probably double secret probation, they kicked him out. A week after that, he stopped by to let us know he’d joined up and off he went to boot camp. We stayed in touch, of course, and were stoked when he was posted to JBLM. That didn’t last, he was shipped overseas. He was wounded, but it wasn’t too bad. He did his tour and made it back.” Jared stopped, his eyes bright with unshed tears. “Turns out he was wounded far worse than we thought.”

“I understand,” Jensen said softly, reacting to the look on the other man’s face. “Quinn wasn’t physically injured as seriously as Chris. He was at the edge of the explosion that nearly killed Chris. We thought we were going to lose them both when they first got home.”

“We learned the hard way about the stats. Twenty-two vets a day commit suicide.”

“I know.”

“So, we help where we can. Maybe those two guys your brother was talking about will be okay because the rescue is there. Maybe there will be more he can help. And helping horses is a good cause. I looked up draft rescues and there aren't many are there?”

“No, there aren't. Quinn kind of fell into it. He was raised around horses, but he'd never worked with drafts.”

“I thought you said you hadn't live on a farm before you came here.” Jared turned to him with a small frown on his face.

“I didn't.”

“But your brother did?”

“He's adopted.” Jensen glanced away for a moment. He didn't usually talk about his family's origins.

“Family by choice is the best kind.” There was something off in Jared's voice. Jensen wasn't sure what it was, but something was there. “In fact, it's the only kind that really matters. The other kind sucks.” He cleared his throat. “What are you planning to work on tomorrow?”

“I was going to take out the bushes at the west end of the house.”

“Good. I'll let you finish what you were doing.” He nodded brusquely and walked away. Jensen watched him go. There was a lot more to his boss than first met the eye. A lot more.

Monday

The morning was crisp, a chill on the air hinting of the autumn that was fast approaching. It was still too early for the trees to start changing on the plateau, but the maples might be changing at higher altitudes. Jensen loved this time of year. The cool nights and warm days invigorated him, he always felt like he accomplished more in the fall than any other season. It would be a beautiful day. There were a few clouds gathered in the foothills, but those would burn off as the sun rose. This time of year tended to be sunny, sometimes they would get so much sun, the locals would start complaining it had been too long without rain.

Jensen wanted to check the irrigation lines before he started removing the boxwood bushes from the west side of the house. Once the plants were gone, he would ask Jared what he wanted to do with that bed. Even though it was on the west side of the house and, in theory, should get the evening sun, a large stand of fir trees blocked it. The area was in shade most of the day. Jensen was going to recommend putting in stone for the time being. That would reduce the moss accumulation on the house, and help drain the upper part of the property.

The timer for the irrigation was in the fuse box in the garage. He checked it and the system was on, set to turn on at four in the morning every other day. According to the timer, it should have come on the night before. He closed the door on the fuse box and walked outside to check the flowers. The beds looked dry. He pushed a finger in the soil, the ground was damp, but that was probably from the watering he'd done in the evening.

After checking the sprinkler heads on that side of the house, he followed the line around the driveway to the front. He was sure he'd checked everything when he put the new planters in, but a second check wouldn't hurt. Following the system through the gardens, he finally located the problem. The line was crushed along the wall of the house. He glanced up to get his bearings, he was in front of the windows for the room Jared used as his office.

Standing, he looked around the garden, there was a clear trail of footprints along the wall, from the entryway past the office window to the dining room. He was sure they hadn't been there Thursday when he and Jeff had put in the planters, he would have noticed them. He stepped out of the flowerbed and around to the entry and, balancing on one leg, compared the footprint to his own shoes. It seemed to be smaller than his foot, and Jared's feet were quite a bit bigger. Maybe Jared had work done while Jensen wasn't there over the weekend, but why would they be walking along the edge of the house? He was considering calling Matt and asking, when he heard a car in the drive.

Jensen walked around the drive to see who it was there, and wasn't surprised it was Matt. The lawyer had coffee cups in his hand.

"Good morning, I brought coffee," Matt said, holding out one of the cups.

"Thanks." Jensen accepted the coffee and took a drink. "I have some of Chris's raisin cinnamon bread, would you like a slice?"

"I'm not saying I was hoping you'd have something that went good with coffee, but..." Matt chuckled as he followed Jensen into the apartment.

"You were hoping I'd have something?" Jensen sliced the bread, put it in the toaster oven and got out the honey-butter Chris made.

"Guilty." Matt leaned against the counter as Jensen fixed the bread. "I stopped by the café and dropped off some cups. Before you say something, they were part of an order the printer mixed up and they were destined for recycling. I thought they might be able to use them." He shrugged. "I hate throwing things like that out, it's some kind of weird reflex left over from when I was a kid. We were dirt poor, so we used everything we possibly could."

"I understand. Jeff didn't have much when he was growing up, so he tends to reuse everything too."

"It's a hard habit to break. I still do it," he laughed. "Drives Jared nuts."

"Chris too," Jensen admitted, laughing along as it occurred to him that was the first time Matt had referred to Jared by his name rather than "the boss" or "our employer".

"I still have a coffee mug I got in college. The handle is broken off, but I use it as a pencil holder on my desk, mostly because he comments on it every single time he comes into the office."

"Jeff has one of those too." Jensen set the bread on a plate and put it on the counter between them. "I was going to call you," he said after a few moments of quiet.

"What's up?"

"I was wondering if anyone was here, working on the house this weekend."

"Why?"

"The irrigation isn't working and I think I found the problem, it looks like someone stepped on the line."

"What?" Matt asked, setting his cup down.

"There are footprints along the windows, they looked too small to be..." He trailed off when he realized the lawyer was staring at him. "It's probably nothing."

"Show me," the lawyer said, heading out the door.

Jensen led him around the house, to where the footprints ran along the wall of the house. The lawyer pulled out his phone and took several photos, including one with his own foot next to one of the prints. He asked Jensen to show him where the irrigation had been damaged. When he asked Jensen if it could be deliberate, Jensen was taken aback.

"Deliberate?" he repeated.

“Yeah,” Matt replied.

“I don’t know. It looks like someone stepped on it.” Jensen looked down at the prints. “They do veer away from the window right where the damage is, though,” he added thoughtfully.

“Right.” Matt pulled out his phone. “We’ve got a problem. I’m changing the code on the gate. I told you four numbers wasn’t enough.” An angry voice spilled out of the phone. It wasn’t loud enough for Jensen to make out the words, but he could hear the tone very clearly. “No.” Matt glanced at Jensen. “Right, I’ll be there in about an hour.” He put the cell in his pocket. “We need to change the gate code.” He looked embarrassed. “Do you know how to do that? Or should I... Damn, I really don’t want to call someone.”

“I know how,” Jensen assured him. “What’s going on?”

“I should have done it before.”

“Matt, what’s going on?”

“We had a break-in at the main office. Some files were taken,” he explained. “I should’ve had everything changed when it happened. Shit.”

“A break-in?”

“I know, right? With the security we have on our offices, you’d think it was impossible. That’s what bugs me.”

“What?”

“The security,” Matt said grimly. “You can’t just walk into the office that lost the files. You need a code to get past the door.”

“Someone in the office?”

“Only answer that fits. It’s why I’m glad you’re working here, not someone the office hired. I’ve been trying to find out who it is, but so far no luck.” Matt shook his head. “It bugs me. I told him I wasn’t just being paranoid when... Never mind, let’s go change the gate code and I’ll meet the boss.”

“I’ll have Quinn come help with the sprinklers,” Jensen offered, hoping his brother wouldn’t strangle him for volunteering him.

“Thanks. No one knows you and your family are working here, do they?”

“No, it’s no one’s business,” Jensen answered with a frown.

“Good. Keep it that way.”

Eleven

Monday

A gentle rain had started falling about noon. Clouds had started gathering along the foothills and dotting the sky as the morning had gone on. Jensen and Quinn had just finished laying the new sprinkler line when the scattered clouds started dropping moisture. Rain and sun was still a new experience for Jensen, in the Southwest it was raining or sunny, not both at the same time, and even after four years here it was a novel thing. Quinn had left, reluctantly, after lunch. After wondering if it was better to let the family know what was going on, or deal with the fallout when they found out, Jensen told him what the lawyer had said, and his brother had called a family meeting. Luckily, Jeff and Chris were busy harvesting, so it had been a teleconference. Jensen figured he’d gotten off easy for a change. No one had demanded he move home, no one

had offered to move to “help” for the duration. His talk with Jeff seemed to have helped with the overprotectiveness of the family.

Since it was raining, Jensen was working on the stable. It was a mid-size building, set down the hill from the main house. It had its own “pasture” of sorts, fenced off from the rest of the property. The south facing wall had a huge bank of windows that lit the interior even on a cloudy, rainy day. There were two stalls and looked like they each had at least one occupant at some time. Judging by what was left, it had been goats, alpacas or perhaps a llama or two. Whatever had been there wasn’t a horse, of that Jensen was sure, even though it had been years since something had been kept in the stable. Between the partially composted straw and droppings left in the stable and the pile he’d discovered behind it, there was ample to enrich the flower beds, as well as take some home to the farm.

As he worked, he wondered what Jared planned for the building. He doubted his employer intended to keep farm animals, but Matt had asked him to clean the stable. If they were intending to demolish it, cleaning it up would not be on the “to do” list. It was actually big enough to turn into a guest house. There was a loft that could easily be turned into the sleeping area. It was bigger than many of the “tiny houses” that were the rage.

Then again, with the windows, it could be adapted into a greenhouse. Not for exotic flowers, but it would work well for herbs and temperate flowers throughout the winter. The more he thought about that idea, the more he warmed to it. Even if there were plans for the stable, he doubted they would get started before the winter weather closed in. If Jared were amenable, maybe they could use the building for herbs for the café until spring. The electricity worked, and he could use a couple free standing oil radiators to keep it warm enough for the herbs. It wouldn’t have to be that warm to have basil all winter, if he stuck to the variety he’d been growing. The purple ruffles basil wouldn’t do well in a temperate greenhouse, but the other could. Between a greenhouse and his cold frames, he could have herbs and greens all winter. He glanced around, it was actually large enough to have a small bed of greens in here, in case the winter was colder than usual.

When he was about halfway through cleaning one of the stalls, he stopped to look at his watch, surprised to discover it was nearly six. He grabbed his tools and started back towards the house. The rain had stopped and the setting sun lit the clouds, making the sky look like it was on fire. Mount Rainier was bathed in an orange glow. Jensen paused and an unexpected emotion caught in his chest. It was the kind of scene he once would have painted, the sky and mountain on fire with the light of the dying sun. He could even see how it would look on the canvas. He was suddenly aware of the ache in his hands, the pain that ran through them at the end of a long day. The sudden grief was almost too much to bear. He took a slow breath, trying to rid himself of the emotion and forced himself to turn from the mountain and headed to his apartment.

A shower helped to clear his mind, and he was contemplating the food in the fridge when there was a tap on the door from the house. He headed up the stairs and opened the door.

“Hey,” Jared said, looking a little sheepish. “I have a pizza, would you like to join me?”

“Sure,” Jensen replied. “I have some tomato salad.”

“I’ll never turn that down!”

Jensen got the salad from the fridge and carried it upstairs. “We’re overrun with tomatoes,” he said, setting the bowl beside the pizza. “Not even Quinn and the birds can eat enough to make a dent in them right now.”

“Lots of tomato specials on the menu this week?” Jared asked with a laugh.

“And next week, too.”

“Good, Matt made reservations for this Saturday. I have root beer, would you like some? It’s a locally made one, it goes good with pizza.”

“Thanks.”

“I had a lunch meeting at this trendy restaurant in Seattle. I’m starving.” Jared set the root beers on the island and sat down across from Jensen. “It was one of those places that seems to care more for how the food looks than how it tastes. Of course, maybe my palate just isn’t sophisticated enough to appreciate it.”

“Chris doesn’t really enjoy those places much either.”

“That’s because his food looks like what it is, good food.” Jared served the pizza. “What I mean is, I think he probably wants people to eat the food, rather than have his fish look like a rosebud or something. Which I guess is fine, if said rosebud tastes like something I want to eat.” Jared paused. “Sorry about that, the meeting keyed me up a little. The bastard chose the restaurant on purpose, because he knows I hate that kind of food.” He rolled his shoulders. “And it felt like it took *days* to get out of there. I left early and took the long way home. Have you ever driven up 169? It’s gorgeous and, at least when I’ve been on it, fairly empty except through Black Diamond.”

“There’s an apiary outside of Maple Valley that supplies the honey for the café. We’ve been out there a couple of times to help.”

“To help with bees?” Jared asked, his eyebrows climbing into his bangs.

“Only indirectly.” Jensen laughed. “They have an apple orchard. We’ve gone out to help them bring the apples in for their harvest festival. It’s strictly trade, they pay us in honey and usually a few gallons of their fresh cider. They also give us some of the apples they can’t sell for the animals.”

“That’s awesome. I meant to ask, did your brother get the horse he was talking about on Saturday?”

“This morning before he came over to help. He said she’s in pretty bad shape. She’s not sure about humans, but I guess Fury immediately tried to make friends.”

“Fury?”

“The Shetland.”

“Fury?” Jared looked at him skeptically.

“Quinn is convinced Shetlands are part hummingbird. Incredibly fierce and willing to take on anything—even something ten times their size.”

“I never thought about it that way before, but hummingbirds really are, aren’t they?”

“They are. We haven’t had Fury long, but he’s always out with the big horses. I’m pretty sure he thinks he *is* a big horse,” Jensen said, remembering Fury out playing with Odin and Thor on Sunday.

“Why do you have a Shetland? I thought you rescued draft horses?”

“Shetlands are draft horses.”

“Ha ha.”

“I would have never believed it either.” Jensen took a sip of the root beer. “But they are. In fact, every year at The Puyallup Fair, they have draft horse exhibitions, and Shetlands are part of them.”

“Huh.”

They were quiet as they finished eating. From where he was sitting, he could see the house was still mostly empty. Although there were a few more things in the kitchen. A tree with coffee mugs stood beside the espresso bar. Most of the cups bore Jared’s corporate logo. He was

surprised when he recognized a Keurig coffee maker on the other side of the mugs, he assumed Jared would use the espresso machine.

“It’s way more work than it’s worth,” Jared said, as if reading his thoughts.

“What?”

“That thing.” He gestured towards the espresso set up. “It looks good, I guess, but it’s a pain in the ass to use and it needs cleaning. The coffee doesn’t taste right. And I’m also lazy, and it takes way more work than popping in a pod and pressing brew.”

“I have one too.”

“Would you like to try my new coffee?” Jared stood and walked over to the cupboard over the coffeemaker. He pulled out a box and brought it back to the table. “It’s a new roast, dark but not as dark as a French or Italian roast.”

“I like dark roast,” Jensen said, accepting the box.

“It’s a shade-grown single origin bean,” Jared said, his face becoming animated as he talked. “It’s part of a new cooperative growing plan I’m starting, which despite naysayers, will work out well for both my company and the growers. I’ve been working on it for the last couple of years. This is the first roast we’re releasing that’s part of that program. We’re planning to premiere it starting next month.”

“I never thought that much about coffee until I moved here,” Jensen admitted. “In the Southwest we drank a lot of coffee. Even when it was over ninety at nine in the morning, we would have coffee. And of course, if company came by, the first thing you did after greeting them was put a pot on, but it was just coffee. It came in a can.”

“We do take coffee a bit to the extreme, don’t we? I saw a standup comedian back East talking about his first trip to Seattle, and how there would be a coffee cart outside the coffee shop so people waiting in line for the shop wouldn’t die from lack of coffee. It didn’t occur to me, until that trip, that—for example—most places don’t have a coffee cup holder in their shopping carts. Or that there are places, elsewhere of course, that the ‘no food or drink’ sign on a store *includes* coffee.”

“Hard to believe, isn’t it?” Jensen asked, laughing at Jared’s tone of mock horror.

“Terrifying. Although, to tell one of my darkest secrets, until I started the company, I didn’t think much beyond what I was ordering, I didn’t think about the beans or where they came from. I knew a bit about roasts, what I liked, what I didn’t. I knew that whatever it was that Mother served, it wasn’t coffee. It was utterly vile. I’m still not sure how it could be quite that foul, but of course part of that might have been the company.” He stopped.

“I still remember my first Northwest coffee experience,” Jensen said, wondering at the look on Jared’s face—part anger and part something else. “I was in Tacoma, and I stopped to get a coffee to wait out rush hour. The guy in front of me ordered a ‘half-caf, low fat, sugar free, raspberry latte, extra hot, no foam’ and I remember wondering if that even counted as coffee.”

Jared chuckled. “I’ve never really liked fruit flavors in coffee. I tried a few when we opened the first shop, so I knew what they tasted like, but since then I’ve avoided them like the plague.”

“Quinn was wondering how many flavors he’d need to stock when he started serving coffee.”

“I can help with that. Have him call me.”

“I don’t want to trouble…” Jensen began.

“It’s no trouble.”

“Thanks, then. I’ll tell him when they call tonight.”

“Do they call every night?” Jared asked.

“Pretty much. They like to check in.”

“That’s good, that they look out for you like that.”

“We look out for each other,” Jensen said, emphasizing the last part.

“I’m glad.” Jared carried their plates to the sink, and stood with his back to Jensen for a moment. When he turned back, his face was serious. “Matt told you about the break-in?”

“He did.”

“The cops think it’s just corporate sabotage.”

“But?” Jensen asked, hearing the pause in the other’s voice.

“Matt doesn’t agree.”

“What does that mean?”

“Either Matt or myself will let you know if we are expecting any deliveries here. If you see anyone on the property that you are not expecting, call the cops first, then call Matt or me. Since you changed the code today, we’re the only ones with the gate code.”

“I, uh, gave it to my family,” Jensen confessed.

“Good, I was about to insist they have it,” Jared said grimly. “Just in case.”

Twelve

Saturday

The scent of coffee filled the air as Jensen got out of his truck at home on Saturday. It had been a busy week at the house. The first of the stalls in the stable was clean and some of the composted material had already been mixed into the flowerbeds. He’d finished removing the bushes on the west side of the house. After talking to Jared about it, they’d decided to put in rock for the time being and it had been delivered on Wednesday. Jensen had spent the better part of Thursday smoothing it out. When he was done, he’d liked the effect, but Friday his arm and hands had ached so badly he’d taken something to help with the pain. As usual the flare of pain had drastically affected his mood, so he spent most of the day doing small jobs and when he’d settled down to dinner, he felt better.

Jensen’s family had come by every day, usually in the morning to check on things and to drop off something for lunch or dinner. Jeff had come to help with the rock on Thursday, but Jensen had sent him home in the early afternoon. He could tell his father’s back was bothering him and Jensen was sure he could finish on his own. As Jeff drove out, Matt had driven in. The lawyer called daily and had been by on Wednesday when the rock was being delivered. Jensen had wondered at the timing, but had shrugged it off to coincidence.

The real surprise of the week had been Jared. He’d knocked on Jensen’s door every night. Tuesday had seemed to be about business, he’d asked what Jensen planned for the area where the box hedge had been removed. Wednesday Jared had invited Jensen up to talk about Jared’s call to Quinn about the espresso bar at the café. Thursday and Friday seemed more like social calls, even though they had discussed projects on the house and yard. They’d spent part of Friday evening in the “white” rooms just off the kitchen. Jared said he was thinking of turning them into a library and reading room, since he had no use for a formal dining room.

“Jensen, come up here and try this,” Quinn called from the front of the café, breaking into Jensen’s thoughts.

“Try what?” Jensen said, heading towards the entrance.

“Coffee,” Quinn answered, leading him inside. “Jeff and Chris won’t drink any more.”
“If I drink more, I’ll never sleep again,” Chris grumbled. “He’s been experimenting for two days.”

“It’s trickier than I thought it would be,” Quinn explained as he walked behind the espresso bar that was now part of the foyer of the café.

“Tricky? How is coffee tricky?” Jensen asked.

“It can be mud, for one thing,” Quinn replied. “Or too weak, or too strong or weird.”

“The weird ones are the best,” Jeff said sarcastically. “Absolutely the best. Now that you’re home, he can experiment on you.”

“I feel so honored.” Jensen eyed the espresso machine dubiously as Quinn made him a coffee.

“Here, try this.” Quinn poured a little milk into the coffee and handed it to Jensen.

“Thanks,” he said automatically and looked down into the cup. The milk hadn’t really changed the color of the coffee at all, and it was strangely opaque. He took a sip. It wasn’t good. He was proud of himself for not gagging or spitting the brew out.

“Whatever you do, don’t say…” Chris whispered.

“I’ve had worse,” Jensen offered, ignoring his brother. Chris banged his head on the table and Jeff groaned.

“Worse how?” Quinn inquired enthusiastically. “Had worse as in ‘I’m saying this to be nice, even though it makes me want to vomit’? Had worse as in ‘not that bad, but needs work’?”

“I don’t want to vomit.”

“But?”

“It’s, um, a little, uh, weird.”

“Damnit, another weird one!” Quinn threw his hands in the air.

“Why don’t you just take Padalecki up on his offer of help?” Jeff asked with a long suffering sigh.

“Because.”

“Because you are pig-headed, that’s why,” Chris said with a frown.

“Can someone fill me in?” Jensen felt like he’d walked into a conversation that was more than half over.

“Padalecki called on Tuesday. He said you’d talked to him,” Jeff began, looking at Jensen.

“I did, I told him you weren’t sure what flavors to carry at first.”

“Right, and so he and Quinn talked for nearly an hour,” Chris picked up the story.

“During the conversation, your boss offered Quinn help getting the whole thing off the ground, you know, get him some training as a barista and all.”

“He did?” Jensen asked, surprised.

“He did and this idiot,” Chris pointed at Quinn, “turned down the offer of help from the man who owns one of the most successful coffee chains in the Northwest.”

“I didn’t turn him down completely,” Quinn mumbled. “I think I said I wanted to try it out myself first.”

“And now you have. For all our sakes, just call him!” Jeff snapped. “You can’t say we’re conspiring anymore. Jensen even agrees the coffee is bad.”

“Weird,” Quinn corrected him smugly. “He said it was weird!”

“Weird is worse than bad, at least with bad you know what’s going on. Weird and coffee really shouldn’t be in the same sentence!” Chris added.

“I’m going to go check and see what needs harvesting,” Jensen said quickly, before he could get dragged into what was obviously a week-long disagreement.

“Okay,” all three chorused.

He walked through the café and into the gardens. It felt like more than a week since he’d been there, and some of the plants showed his absence. The flowers were looking a little ragged. They desperately needed trimming. He would need to have a bigger bouquet than usual in the entry this weekend to utilize the dahlias. After walking through the flowers and planning his arrangements, he wandered over to the tomatoes. The tomato vines were loaded with fruit and there were peppers and eggplant ripe as well. As he made his way along the rows, he noticed the pattypan squash were ripe and covered the vines that wound along the ground. He wondered if Chris had noticed and was planning on the squash as part of the specials for the week or if he needed to let his brother know.

Jensen was walking through the rows, planning what needed to be harvested immediately, what needed to be done tomorrow and then what could wait until later in the week when his phone rang. He glanced at the caller ID and wondered why Matt was calling. “Hello?” he answered.

“Hey, your brother is on the phone with Jared, I guess there is something wrong with his coffee?” Matt sounded amused.

“I understand he’s having a hard time learning the nuances of being a barista.”

“Been there,” the lawyer chuckled. “We were wondering if it was okay if we came by and gave him a hand with the coffee and maybe he could show us the rescue?”

“Why are you asking me?”

“Seemed easier than breaking into the ‘discussion’ on the other phone.”

Knowing what a call with his family all chiming in was like, Jensen grinned. “Sure, I can tell them, when did you want to come by?”

“Would an hour be okay?”

“See you then,” Jensen said, breaking the connection and heading towards the café.

After he delivered the message, Jensen returned to the gardens with baskets. Chris wanted squash for the special, so he was starting there. He’d been working for several minutes, when Jeff appeared, picked up one of the baskets and headed into the tomatoes. He could hear Jeff muttering to the plants, so he grabbed another basket and wandered into the tomatoes to give his father a chance to talk.

“How’s it going?”

“Your brothers are driving me insane,” Jeff said, glancing over at him. “The coffee is just the latest thing. Before we got that stuff, it was what needed to be harvested, even though we had your notes. I’m going to start coming over to help you permanently if they don’t knock it off.”

“Jeff?”

“I don’t know,” he answered the unspoken question. “Things have been tense the last couple of weeks. We’re worried about you, and that’s part of it, but not all. You know how it is.”

“Has something happened?”

Jeff’s shoulders slumped. “We were all in the barn and there was this weird *thump* from the direction of the highway. I didn’t even think about it. You know we hear the trucks across the way sometimes.”

“But?”

“I looked over at Chris and Quinn—and Quinn was frozen in place, his face white and he was shaking. Like…” He broke off and looked away. “They’ve been bickering since then.”

Jensen set his basket down and walked over to put his hand on his father's shoulder. "You should have called me."

"They seemed okay, and I would have thought they were except this bickering and the fact they are up most of the night. I heard Quinn out with the horses last night about two. When I asked him about it, he said he was sitting with Frigga and Fury."

"I'm home for a couple of days, maybe one of them will talk to me."

"If nothing else," Jeff said after a moment. "You can keep Quinn and his coffee away from the rest of us."

"Oh no, I will not drink another cup of that until he learns better." Jensen smiled and went back to work. "I was serious when I said it wasn't the worst cup of coffee I'd ever have, but it was a close second."

"And think, he's had a couple of days to practice. You should've had to try the first few." Jeff made a face and laughed. Jensen laughed with him, feeling the tension disappearing as they worked.

They were just finishing the tomatoes when Jensen heard someone pull up in front of the café. He thought it must be a delivery, since it sounded like a truck. He walked to the edge of the fields. There was a large, black pickup parked in front of the building, but Jared and Matt were getting out of it. He let Jeff know, picked up the baskets of vegetables he'd harvested and headed into the café, reaching the kitchen about the same time as Quinn and Chris let his employer and the lawyer in. He heard Jeff come in behind him, and they both walked through the dining room to the foyer.

"Thank you for coming," Quinn was saying as they walked in. "I didn't think it would be this hard."

"Believe me, it can be a pain in the ass," Matt said, rolling his eyes.

"Some people never get the hang of it." Jared laughed and nudged Matt with his shoulder.

"I think I said I was never meant to be a barista."

"Is there hope for Quinn? Chris asked.

"Of course there is!" Jared replied. "Make me a cup of coffee, and let's see what you do."

"You're taking your life into your hands." Jeff joined the group.

"He's had my coffee, if he can survive that, he can survive anything," Matt said with a grin and drifted over to where Jensen was standing. "I know to get out of the way," he said *sotto voce*.

They were all quiet while Quinn made a cup of coffee, then handed it to Jared. He took a sip, grimaced, walked around the coffee bar and poured it out. "That bad?" Quinn asked.

"At least that bad, but I can fix it," Jared responded, reaching for a cup. "First, you need to..."

"I have to finish harvesting," Jensen said to the room at large. No one answered, they were all intently watching what Jared was doing.

"Maybe I can help?" Matt said.

"With the harvesting?" Jensen looked at him with disbelief.

"I can do things like that." He followed Jensen into the kitchen and accepted a pair of scissors and a basket from him, then they walked together into the gardens.

"I didn't get a chance to finish the squash or the herbs," Jensen told him.

"I'll do the squash. How much do you need?"

"Work on filling the basket. I'll be over to help as soon as I get some basil cut."

“Righto, Boss,” the lawyer said, snapping off a salute, then set to work.

Jensen had just finished the basil and was debating to start on other herbs, or go check out the progress with the coffee. He was reluctant to leave the gardens, working among the fragrant herbs had helped the pain in his arm and hand. It always happened, he was sure it was psychosomatic, but after being surrounded by green growing things, especially the herbs, his hands and arm would stop their painful buzzing and he would even regain a little control of fine movement in his left hand. His right hand remained clumsy, but the left would start working better, giving him hope that one day he might...

“All done,” Matt broke into his thoughts before they could ruin his mood.

“Really? You’re pretty good at that for...”

“A guy with a law degree?” Matt laughed. “I told you we were dirt poor when I was a kid. I’d spend summers with my grandparents, and they had a small, well it wasn’t really a farm, but it was more than just a garden. I think grandma thought it was good for me to be out working. I helped bring the stuff in, I even helped can once or twice when their neighbors brought them fruit.”

Jensen knew he was staring. The story seemed very at odds with the man standing in front of him.

“Summers were best. They pretty much left me alone when I was working and there was always enough to eat. It wasn’t fancy, but it was enough. Some nights all we had were veggies and eggs, but that was okay. It was better there than at home.” He looked sad for a moment, then forced a laugh. “God it sounds so tragic doesn’t it? Trudging through the fields in my shoes with a piece of a box as a sole in one of them. It might have looked bad, I guess, but summers were good. The rest of the year sucked until I was twelve.”

“What happened when you were twelve?” Jensen asked.

“My father was killed in a car wreck and my mother lost it. My grandparents took me in, but they lived way out in the middle of nowhere and there wasn’t a decent school. Grandpa believed in education, he’d been in the seminary, but left right before he met grandma. Said he wasn’t the religious type. Anyway, he thought school was important and got me enrolled at St Jerome’s Prep.”

“Wow.” Jensen had heard of the prestigious school. An artist he’d met at a show in Arizona had gone there before winning a scholarship to university.

“I know, right? One of the Brothers was still friends with grandpa, and he arranged for uniforms and everything. I arrived with nothing, but it was okay. There was a bit of bullying, but once I proved myself academically, I was left alone.”

“Seriously?”

“I might have written a paper for the chief bully once or twice that first year,” Matt said with a sly smile. “Brother Alfred discovered what I was up to and had me moved into the dorm he was in charge of. That’s how I ended up with a new roommate. He was a little scrawny kid like me, but the two of us equaled one bully, so people left me—and him—alone after that.”

“Are you two just standing around?” Jeff called from the backdoor.

“No, we’re working,” Jensen shouted back.

“Right, Chris is prepping, but Quinn and Jared are going to the barn, do you want to come with us?”

“I need to finish the herbs, but Matt can...”

“Oh hell no. Horses are huge, and yours are bigger than most.”

“We’ll finish, and meet you back in the café.”

“Okay!” Jeff waved and went back inside.

“I thought you wanted to see the rescue?” Jensen turned to Matt.

“No, Jared does. I’m terrified of horses. My grandpa’s neighbor had one, kicked me in the leg once. I limped all damn summer. My roommate thought it was funny when I got back to school. He hasn’t let me live it down since.”

“Your roommate?” Jensen felt like he’d missed something.

“Yes,” Matt grumbled. “Show me what needs to be done.”

“We need cilantro and then we’ll get the rest.” Jensen led the way, wondering about the lawyer as they went. Every time he thought he’d figured Matt out, there was something more. It was strange, the lawyer spoke as if Jensen knew a lot of the story already, and that was odd. He was still thinking about it when his brain registered the scent of something burning. He looked up and saw a wisp of smoke on the other side of the house. A second later he heard the terrified shriek of a horse. “Oh my god! Fire!” and he started running towards the barn.

Thirteen

Saturday

Smoke was curling around Jensen as he ran across the fields. He could see the leading edge of the fire in the long grass on the highway side of the property. It was moving quickly towards the barn and he could hear the terrified sound of the horses. He was aware of Matt behind him and from somewhere in the distance the scream of sirens.

“Quinn!” he shouted as he reached the barn.

“Get Thor!”

Jensen spotted his brother on the other side of the barn, trying to get Frigga out of her stall. He could see the fire through the small door at the end of the building. The flames were perilously close to their fence line. He ran to Thor’s stall and tried to quiet the horse as he opened the stall. Once he had it open, Thor raced for the barn door and out into the field beyond. As soon as the horse was safely out of the building, he ran to the next stall. Fury was huddled in the corner. He made a soothing sound and opened the door, knowing the Shetland was still frightened of most humans. The pony seemed to move further into the back of the stall. Jensen wasn’t sure what to do, when he heard Quinn’s shout. He looked around in time to see Frigga run out the door, before he could even turn around, Fury was past him and chasing the large draft horse into the fields.

“Odin and Freya?” Quinn asked, running to Jensen.

“Out here!” Jeff called.

“They’re all out,” Matt said from the door. “Where’s Jared?”

“He grabbed the hose to try and keep the fire away until we could get the animals out,” Quinn said as they reached the lawyer.

“Of course he did,” Matt said with a frustrated huff. “Because you’re supposed to run towards fire.” He shook his head.

The sirens abruptly stopped and Jensen could hear men shouting. The smoke began to give way to the scent of water and wet grass. He was about to go out and see what’s happening when Jared came through the back door of the barn.

“Fire department’s here,” he said, walking towards them and running a hand over his face. “It got hot out there.” He stumbled as he headed towards them, then fell.

“Jared!” Matt was across the barn and beside him before Jensen could even get moving.

“Might have been too hot,” Jared mumbled as Jensen reached them.

“We need an EMT in here!” Jeff was shouting.

“I’m okay, just got dizzy.” Jared struggled to sit up.

“You are staying right there until you get checked,” Matt growled.

“I’m fine,” he protested.

“What’s going on?” the EMT asked as he approached. Jensen recognized him, Shane and his wife were regulars at the café.

“He came in and collapsed,” Matt answered.

“I didn’t collapse, I fell,” Jared corrected.

“What were you doing before you fell?” Shane knelt beside Jared.

“I was outside.”

“Ah, you were the guy with the hose that the chief yelled at?”

“That’s me,” Jared confirmed with a smile.

“So what happened?”

“I came in the barn and felt a little dizzy.” Jared frowned. “My hands sting,” he said in surprised.

“Your hands?” Matt looked from Jared’s face to his hands. Jensen followed his look and knew he noticed the red skin half a second before Matt. The lawyer’s face paled. “You stupid sonofabitch.”

“I need space,” Shane said. When Matt didn’t move, the EMT looked at up. “Jensen?”

“What? Oh, hey, let’s wait outside.”

“But…” Matt began.

“Go, I’m fine, I promise I won’t do anything stupid in the next hour,” Jared said.

“You better not,” the lawyer replied, got up and stalked out of the barn.

The family was gathered just outside, Jensen joined them. The horses were on the far side of the field and Quinn was walking toward them. Fury was standing close to Frigga; the others were gathered together a little further away. Odin was eyeing them from where he was standing, his head up and his whole posture showing the stress the evacuation had caused. Thor was leaning against one of the fence poles, his head was down as he grazed. Jensen couldn’t stop the laugh, Thor seemed to judge crises based on his stomach. He wondered if horses could be stress eaters.

“Is it okay if I get back to work prepping for dinner?” Chris asked, shifting from foot to foot.

“Are you okay to do that?” Jeff looked at him a serious expression on his face.

“If I don’t do something, I’m going to blow,” Chris snapped. “Sorry.”

“I’ll stay here and keep an eye on Quinn and talk to the fire guys. Jensen can you help Chris?”

“On the way,” Jensen said, taking one last look into the barn, then heading towards the café.

Jensen stopped by the kitchen to see what else Chris needed before returning to the gardens. His brother was chopping onions at his typical high speed rate, and everything would have seemed perfectly normal except Jensen could hear the extra little sound the knife made when it hit the cutting board. Once he noticed that, he could see the tension carved in the lines of his brother’s back.

“What do you need?” Jensen asked, Chris would understand the question wasn’t just about vegetables.

“Chives, maybe some chive flowers too, if they’re still any good. Basil, cilantro, rosemary, sage, thyme. How many tomatoes do you have?”

“A full basket and a little more.”

“Get another basket of tomatoes then too, we need to use them anyway.”

“Chris?”

“I’m okay, go.”

“Right.” Jensen clapped his brother on the back, picked up several empty harvesting baskets and went into the gardens. Before he started working, he carried in the basil he’d harvested before the fire, and after confirming Chris still needed more, went back to the fields. The wind had shifted, the scent of wet, burned grass was being blown the other way, and the gardens smelled of tomato vines, basil and cilantro. When he reached the tomatoes, he was surprised to discover Matt there, sitting in between the rows.

“Hey,” he said as Jensen approached.

“Hey.” Jensen stopped for a moment wondering what to do, then decided to apply Jeff’s all purpose “when you aren’t sure what to do, keep hands busy and things will happen” rule to the situation. “I need to get another whole basket of tomatoes. I have no idea what he’s making, but he needs more. Want to help?”

“Sure,” Matt said listlessly and stood. “These?” He waved at the vines in front of him.

“Some of those, then we’ll move to the others further down.”

“Okay.”

They started picking and had been working in silence for several minutes. Jensen was listening to the sounds of home. The birds in the catch basin for the property, which in reality was more a wetland than anything else, were raising a racket. One of the hummingbirds was chasing something, judging from the chatter. There was the soft sound of the breeze in the plants and that sound of rushing water that wind in cottonwood trees produced. The day had settled back into the quiet peace of the place, and it let what had happened play at the edge of his awareness, without becoming overwhelming. It had been the first fire they’d experienced in the Northwest. For better or worse, they’d seen—and lived through—several while they were in the Southwest. It made letting this event go easier, they all knew how bad it could be, and this had seemed fairly easy all things considered.

“Jared was sitting up when I headed this way,” he said as he thought about it.

“Idiot,” Matt growled, then looked over. “Not you!”

“I know.”

“He’s always been like that too, it’s what makes him a great businessman, that fearlessness, but I swear to god, it’s going to give me a coronary one of these days.”

“Oh?” Jensen asked with gentle encouragement, but not pressing for an answer.

“Yeah,” Matt said, shaking his head. “The second summer we were at school, he said he wanted to come home with me instead back to his house. I was a little freaked, he knew we didn’t have a lot of money, but there is a difference between knowing in abstract and experiencing. He said he didn’t care, and so he came out to the farm and dove into everything there with the same reckless enthusiasm. Fishing where there were rattlesnakes? No problem. Helping with the neighbor’s cows? No problem. Going ‘white water rafting’ on an air mattress? Oh yeah, let’s do that.”

“Quinn can be like that sometimes,” Jensen offered, remembering Chris and his long winded complaints about Quinn when they were in the service.

“So you know.”

“A little.”

“He’s like that with business too. Once he gets an idea in his head, it’s full steam and damn to torpedoes from there. We were seventeen when he bought the first coffee stand.”

“Seventeen?” Jensen asked, still digesting the fact that Matt and Jared had known each other a lot longer than he’d assumed at first—and more than that, were obviously close.

“Believe it or not. There was this little shop we went to all the time. We’d skip out of our afternoon classes and go get coffee and Bruce, the owner, never said a word about it. He was an interesting guy and had started the shop and roasting his own coffee before the fad really hit. We went in one day and he said he was thinking of selling, he just hated the idea that the shop would probably be turned into something else. Before I could even say I was sorry he might be leaving, Jared was asking questions.” Matt paused and chuckled. “By the time we got back to school that night, he’d gone quiet—the silence before the storm. Sure enough, the next morning he announced he was going to buy the place. He had enough in savings and asked if I’d help. Of course I said yes.” He rolled his eyes. “I wasn’t kidding when I said I suck at being a barista. Things like that don’t slow him down, though, and before summer arrived, the place was doing really well. We even had the first of our signature roasts.”

“At seventeen?”

“Yeah, seventeen. He already had a second stand—this one a drive-thru—by his eighteenth birthday, and a third by mine.”

“Wow.”

“I know, right? Most kids that age are spending their time getting drunk and doing stupid shit. Jared was busy starting an empire. Don’t get me wrong, he was still doing stupid shit. I tried to temper it, but every once in a while he just had to scare me to death. He says it’s good for my nerves.”

“It is,” Jared said from behind them. They both jumped and turned to him, startled. “It’s good for the sinuses too,” he added with a grin that lit his eyes.

“Are you going to stand there, or help us?” Matt snapped.

“I’d help, but they put something on my hands to numb them.”

“What’d they say?” Jensen asked, sensing a building explosion in the lawyer and hoping to diffuse it.

“It’s no worse than a sunburn, and my lungs are clear. I just got too hot. They told me to get something cool to drink and take it easy. They also said I should get some burn cream at the store, since my hands might hurt a bit tonight.”

“The EMTs told you to get a drink and take it easy?” Matt’s voice was completely calm.

“Uh huh.”

“Which is why you are standing out here in the sun?” The calm continued.

“Uh huh.”

“With nothing to drink?”

“Matt? I’m okay. I was on my way in and stopped to make sure you were okay,” Jared said softly, a frown curling between his eyebrow, his eyes flicking back and forth from Matt to Jensen.

“Except for the heart attack I’m fine.”

“I don’t know, it looks like you have more white in your hair too.” Jared was grinning again.

“Fuck you,” the lawyer said good-naturedly, returning the grin.

“Can I take anything in?” Jared asked.

“Can you carry this?” Jensen picked up the half-full basket of tomatoes.

“Yeah.” Jared wrapped an arm around it, carefully keeping it away from his hands. “I’ll be back in a bit.”

“You’ll be back when you’ve finished at least one full glass of water,” Matt scolded.

“That’s what I mean,” Jared assured him and smiled, then headed off towards the café.

Jensen watched until he reached the door before returning to work. The interplay between Matt and Jared had been interesting, their affection for each other was very apparent in the exchange. The odd thing was, as he thought about it, Jensen realized there was an emotion churning in his chest. He wouldn’t call it jealousy, but it was something akin to that, and that surprised him more than anything had in a long time.

Fourteen

Sunday

Sunday mornings had once seemed quiet, but that was before Jensen had started working for Jared at the house. Mornings there were completely devoid of sound. His bedroom was set in the hillside, so even the sounds of nature were muted there. Things were different at home. Birdsong drifted in the window, he could hear the horses in the field and most importantly, he could hear the soft murmur of conversation from downstairs. As he padded down the hallway, he noticed Quinn’s door was open and the bed didn’t look like it had been slept in. That was worrying after the day before. They’d all been exhausted when they said goodnight, so Jensen had assumed his brothers would sleep.

He should have known better.

Both his brothers reacted to the scent of burning vegetation or gasoline. When they were still in the Southwest, they’d driven past a wreck on the freeway, the hulk of the car still burning, and Quinn had the worst setback since he’d left the hospital. Chris had tried to explain, but had ended up shaking his head helplessly as he, too, became trapped in the horror of the memory. Jeff and Jensen never asked for explanations, they just did their best to support Chris and Quinn. It was hard, not being able to help, not knowing what to do, but so far they’d made it through each storm. Yesterday had been no different, or so he hoped. Sometimes he worried that something bad would happen, but the further they moved away from their years in service, the better Quinn and Chris seemed. Still Jensen worried.

All things considered, yesterday had gone remarkably well after the fire. Jensen and Matt did most of the harvesting, while Jared helped by carrying the baskets to the kitchen, although mostly he’d spent the afternoon alternately teasing them and eating tomatoes. If someone had told Jensen on Friday, he’d spend his half day off working in the gardens with his boss and the lawyer he would have laughed. If they’d told him how much he’d enjoy it, he would have considered them insane. But it *had* been fun. He’d fallen into the easy bantering between the two and before he knew it, he was swept up in the teasing, joking and laughter. By the time Jeff and Quinn returned to help, everything was pretty much done and they’d all gone in to help with prep. Surprisingly, the sense of comfortable companionship continued to the point that Chris

invited Jared and Matt to share their meal before service started. They'd bid goodnight to the two right before the café opened, with Jared promising to be back the next day to test Quinn's coffee making skills and to make sure he was "the first paying customer of the espresso stand".

"Morning," Jensen said as he walked into the kitchen.

"Coffee?" Jeff asked from where he was standing by the coffeemaker. "I guarantee it's not weird."

"Thanks." Jensen took the mug from his father. "I'm not sure I'm awake enough for weird. You have to stop letting me sleep in like this."

"You think we don't know how hard you're working yourself?" Chris turned to him with a stern look as Jensen sat at the table.

"I'm not."

"You are, and don't bother to argue because we won't listen," Quinn said. "In case you didn't notice, we we've all be over to help, remember?"

"Fine," Jensen huffed. "How are the horses?"

"Still a little spooked, but they seem to have made it through unscathed." Quinn leaned back in his chair. "Shane stopped by on his way in this morning and said they think it was a cigarette that started the thing. Some idiot tossed it out their car window, forgetting about the combustibles lining the road," he said with derision.

"It's lucky you were there right as it got going." Jeff joined them at the table.

"It's lucky Jensen's boss is completely insane and grabbed a hose to deal with a brush fire." Quinn chuckled. "Although Shane said the Chief was bitching about it, it did help. A little extra moisture in the air can make a big difference with a runaway fire."

"It can," Chris agreed and the two shared a look.

After a few moments of silence, Jeff cleared his throat. "What's on the table for today, boys?"

"There's a lot of squash to bring in over the next few days, we don't want to leave it too long. Some of the basil as getting leggy and I need to trim the dahlias," Jensen said.

"I'll make sure I put squash on the menu for the week. I have a new recipe I want to try out, so we'll have that before you go back to work tonight, Jensen, just to make sure it's passable." Chris set a skillet filled with potatoes, onions, eggs and bacon on the table and put a small dish of shredded cheese beside it. He mixed cheese in the eggs, but they all liked extra on top.

"Jared and Matt are coming by at noon to help with the espresso," Quinn said as he served himself from the skillet.

"Both of them?" Chris raised an eyebrow.

"That's what he said when he left. 'We will be by at noon'." Quinn changed the pitch in his voice and sounded remarkably like Jared.

"Do you think they're together?" Chris looked at Quinn and they both turned to Jensen.

"Don't ask me, I don't know," Jensen replied. "I know they're friends."

"Obviously." Quinn rolled his eyes.

"They haven't told me, how's that?" Jensen snapped, then stopped, wondering where that reaction was coming from.

"Boys," Jeff said quietly.

The conversation turned to other things. Jensen went back to planning what needed to be done in the gardens before he left, and what he could leave for the family while he was at work for the week. After they finished eating, he and Jeff headed out into the fields and discussed

everything that needed harvesting and what Jensen planned to do with the flowers that were blooming faster than they could harvest. Once they were done there, they moved to the herb gardens. Jensen checked on the cilantro he'd let bloom. The tiny white flowers were giving way to the bright green seeds that would become coriander. Chris was already planning recipes to take advantage of both the coriander, and the seeds from the bronze fennel that filled one corner of the garden with the scent of licorice.

"Jensen?" Jeff waited until they were well out of ear-shot of both the house and the café.

"Yeah?"

"Do you want to tell me what's going on?"

"Going on?" Jensen repeated. His father fixed him with the look that, when he was a child, could get him to talk about almost anything. "I don't know," he said with a shrug.

"Are you working too hard?"

"Maybe a little. My hand has been bothering me sometimes at night, but not too much. I think it's not switching jobs around enough. Here I move around from things that require more fine control to more brute labor, I should do that more there. Work on weeding, then the stable, then whatever else. I'm a little worried about the inside work, if I can even do it over the long haul."

"We're always here to help."

"I know, Jeff." He looked down at his hand, at the long scar that ran across the palm of his right hand and the other that ran from his wrist to beyond his elbow. His left hand was better than it had been when he'd laid down the night before, the pain had backed off to the weird electrical buzzing and tingling numb fingers. He'd told Jeff the truth, though, he didn't really know what was pushing his mood.

"Is it Jared or Matt?"

"They're both different than I thought," Jensen said, deliberately misinterpreting the question. "Matt stops by with coffee a lot of mornings and most nights after work, Jared will knock on the door to chat about what I've done or to let me know something he wants to get finished." He took a breath and looked across the fields, watching the grass move in the wind. "It bothers me," he blurted out suddenly, voicing the thought that had floated to the surface of his mind.

"What does?" Jeff asked, turning to meet his eyes.

"The painting."

"That it's there?"

"In a way," Jensen admitted. "But it's more knowing it's there and not being able to see it. That sounds wrong, that's not what I mean."

"I think it is. I don't mean that in a bad way, son," Jeff said gently. "That painting is more than just paint on canvas. It symbolizes the break between that life and this one. It's everything that's gone."

"How the hell do you know that?" Jensen felt tears burning in his eyes.

"I know how hard it was for you to sell it. Any other painting would have been a loss, because of what happened, but that one was more than that. You know if we'd known you were going to okay the sale, we would have stopped it."

"I know, that's why I didn't tell you until it was too late."

"Did you know Chris and Quinn tried to find out who the gallery sold it to?"

"Why?"

“Why do you think? We were going to try and buy it back.” Jeff smiled and put a hand on Jensen’s shoulder. “Why don’t you ask him about it?”

“Jared?”

“Yes.”

“I shouldn’t even know it’s there. It’s in the part of the house that was finished. Quinn was snooping.”

“Were you expressly forbidden to go into that room?” Jeff asked.

“No,” Jensen answered cautiously.

“Ask him. I think I was wrong about him. He seems very different than the image that’s painted in the press. Look at the help he’s giving Quinn.”

“You think you were?” Jensen grinned at him.

“I’m reserving judgement,” Jeff replied, returning his grin.

“Jeff,” Jensen began, finally letting the question that had been haunting him since he’d seen the painting hanging in Jared’s house. “Do you think he knows who I am?”

“At one time I would have said you had an unusual name,” Jeff said with a wry smile. When they’d moved to the plateau they’d discovered the area had been settled by Danes and Jensen was a common surname in the area. “There’s a chance he hasn’t connected the name of the artist with you—and that’s assuming he even knows the name of the person who painted the picture. You know as well as I do, that people will buy art because it moves them, and they don’t care who created it.”

“Not even if it’s a cat,” Jensen added his brothers’ favorite line.

“Exactly. And we let the world think you were, if not dead, long gone.”

“That doesn’t really answer my question.”

“I know it doesn’t. I called the gallery after Quinn found the painting at Jared’s and asked, again, who had purchased the painting and while Francis was kind, he insisted he didn’t know. I’m not sure if he was lying or not. We don’t even know if Jared was the original buyer or if he acquired it after that initial sale.”

“You’re right.”

“So, ask him.”

“What? To see the painting? Or if he knows I painted it?”

“That has to be your choice, Jensen.”

“You’re right about that too,” Jensen said after a long moment of silence between them.

“Of course I am,” Jeff laughed and pulled Jensen against him in a one-armed hug. “That’s my job.”

They stood together for a long time. Jensen drawing from the steady strength of his father’s presence as he turned the question over in his mind. Should he ask to see the painting? Was he obsessing on it? Could Jared know who he was? And if so, what did that mean? What did he know about the attack? Jensen shook himself. Jeff was right, he needed to ask.

“I see Jared’s truck. Let’s head back to the café and let Quinn poison us with his grand experiment.”

“Yeah.” Jensen nodded. “Thanks.”

As they walked back, Jensen thought about the other question his father had asked. *Jared or Matt?* Jensen wasn’t ready to admit the answer, even as it tumbled around in his head.

Fifteen

Sunday

The sun was dipping behind the foothills as Jensen pulled through the gate at the house, waiting to make sure it closed behind him before driving towards the house. He was tired and later than he'd planned but all in all it had been a good day. He and Jeff had worked out a plan for the gardens, to make sure the harvest was in hand for the next week.

The flowers had been Jensen's only worry, he hated wasting the blooms, but fate had stepped in to help with that. The owners of a small orchard had called and asked how much Jensen would charge for flowers. They had a wedding planned in their barn, but the florist had backed out at the last minute. Mimi had assured him she could handle the arrangements, she just needed the flowers. They made a deal for a trade—pears for dahlias—and she'd come to harvest the blooms shortly after noon. It had taken less than an hour for her to get what she needed and Chris was thrilled with the first of three “orders” of pears.

When she was gone, he decided to take a break and joined the group in the foyer as Jared worked on getting Quinn's coffee up to his exacting standards. Jensen was surprised at how seriously Jared was taking the process. After each cup Quinn made, he'd taste it, then make comments on what still needed to be done. The really surprising thing was how well Quinn was taking the instruction. After watching for almost forty-five minutes, he'd asked Matt if he'd like to help in the gardens while Jared was involved with the coffee and the lawyer had readily agreed. They headed in when they had a large basket of tomatoes and another of the pattypan squash.

When they arrived in the foyer, Jared declared that Quinn's coffee passed the test and they all had a celebratory cup of coffee. Jared insisted on paying for them, saying it was bad luck to give away the first cup. Jensen was shocked at the difference in the taste and quality of the coffee compared to his first taste of Quinn's espresso Saturday morning.

As nice as the days at home had been, he'd actually been looking forward to returning to the apartment this week. It wasn't that he didn't love being with his family—that would always be home—but he was learning to enjoy being alone for the first time since he'd been at university. He had time alone at home, even after the attack, but it wasn't like this, actually alone. No one to hear him fussing in the middle of the night, no one checking on him if he went quiet for an hour. Of course, the family called several times a day, but that never felt intrusive, neither did their attention at home, he always had the space he needed, but this was different.

Jensen pulled into the garage and walked into his apartment, dropping his keys in the bowl on the desk. He tended to forget where he put them if he didn't put them in the same place every day. At the farm, there were hooks on the wall by the back door. He'd considered that for here, but had discovered a decorative bowl he'd purchased at a crafter's market in Canada and decided to use that instead.

After changing into sweats and a t-shirt, he went into the kitchen and turned the water on. Wasting water bothered him after growing up in the Southwest, but sometimes he could stop the ache in his hands by holding them in running water. He'd tried soaking them, but it wasn't the same. Running water was one of the only things that helped, it could even forestall the need for pain meds. He thought he'd been careful and let his hands rest over the weekend, but they ached to the point he was considering actually taking something.

He'd just turned off the water and was flexing his hands, the last two fingers on the right were particularly uncooperative, when he heard a tap on his door. Even though he'd been half-expecting it, he was still surprised. He headed up the stairs and opened the door. Jared was

standing there, bandages wrapped around his hands. Jensen hadn't remembered seeing the them while Jared had been helping Quinn. "Are you alright?" he asked by way of greeting.

"Yes." Jared smiled. "They aren't that bad, really, but they have been itching and once I didn't have anything else to focus on, I started obsessing just a little. I called my doctor, in case there was something wrong, and he suggested putting a little more topical anesthetic on them, and covering them with a bandage, so if I do scratch them I won't hurt them. I did all that, only now I can't feel the tape well enough to stick it to the damn things. I really don't want to call him back on Sunday and ask him to come over and help and if I call Matt..." It came out in a rush, like he was embarrassed about not being able to take care of it himself.

"It's okay, I understand," Jensen said, stepping into the house.

"Thank you!" Jared beamed at him. "I have everything in the kitchen." Jared led the way into the kitchen. There was a box of bandages and a roll of paper tape on the island. Several pieces of tape were stuck to the counter top and along the edge. "I tried a few times before I sucked it up and knocked on your door," he said with a laugh.

"That's a good technique." Jensen pointed to the tape stuck along the edge.

"If you can feel your fingers," Jared added.

"There is that."

"I thought it through, halfway. I didn't factor in the numbness." Jared sat down on one of the stools and laid his hands on the island.

"That's usually my downfall, too." Jensen picked up the tape and tore off a piece. He carefully folded the unfinished end of bandage, then put the tape on it.

"Stick another on there, I'm a picker."

Jensen dutifully put another piece on, then did his other hand. He checked it over and added another piece of tape on the left hand for good measure. "There you go," he said with a smile when he finished.

"Thanks. Do you except root beer as payment?"

"Sure."

"Can you open one for me, too?"

"Of course," Jensen assured him as he opened the refrigerator to get the soda. He grabbed a couple of bottles of root beer. He was debating asking Jared about the painting. He'd thought about it off and on all afternoon, but was still unsure whether he wanted to ask about the painting, or if Jared knew. When he turned around, Jared was looking at him, a small frown on his face. "Here you go," he said, setting the bottle in front of him. "Can you pick it up?"

"I can manage that, it's the fine movement that's hard..." Jared stopped, turned bright red and looked at the bottle like he'd never read the label before. An awkward silence filled the room.

"I, uh, guess I should go," Jensen said after finding it increasingly hard not to fidget. He stood and turned to go.

"No, wait." Jared's hand on his arm stopped him.

"What?"

"Matt and I had one hell of a fight this afternoon."

"Oh?" Jensen wondered why Jared was telling him something that personal.

"And he's right, I... I need to tell you something."

"Jared..." He began, feeling a chill run down his spine.

"Come with me." Jared gave his arm a tug and headed out of the kitchen towards the stairs. He led the way up and turned down the hallway on the second floor. He paused in front of

the door to the room that had the painting in it. "I should have told you when I first talked to you." He opened the door. "I've been debating telling you something needed to be fixed in here, just to start the conversation."

Jensen was looking at the painting, lit by professional museum-style lighting. "I don't..."

"I loved it the first time I saw it." Jared stepped closer to it. "I wanted it, but the gallery said it wasn't for sale. I made an offer, and the gallery refused. Several months after the... disappearance... I called him and made sure he knew the offer still stood."

"I knew it was here," Jensen heard himself saying.

"How?"

"Quinn, he was snooping the day we worked in the house."

"I should have known." Jared's voice was more amused than angry.

"I've wanted to ask you about it since then. I've been debating all day, today. Jeff and I even talked about it."

"Debating what?"

"Whether I was just going to ask to see it again, or if..."

"If what, Jensen?" Jared asked gently.

"If you knew I'd painted it."

"Yes, I know. Matt recognized you the first time he was in the café."

"He did?" Jensen remembered the lawyer asking if they knew each other.

"He did."

"I've never met him before." Jensen wanted to add there was no way someone could know him from a news piece either. He'd been very careful to keep his picture out of the media as much as possible.

"Actually, you have. In fact," Jared said, looking at the picture for a moment, before turning back. "We have."

"No." Jensen shook his head in disbelief.

"It was a long time ago." Jared sighed. "I might as well get it all out," he said more to himself.

"What?"

"Let's go downstairs."

"Okay." Jensen followed Jared down the steps, but instead of returning to the kitchen, Jared led the way down the hallway to his office. He pulled a set of keys from his pocket and unlocked the door.

"When my father died, I took over the family business. I liquidated a lot of it right away, but there were several holdings in Arizona I wanted to check out before I decided what to do with them. So Matt and I headed down there. While we were there, Matt thought it would be a good idea to get to know the community better. We went to a variety of functions, including several gallery shows. I didn't want to go, I've never had much use for things like that, but Matt is persuasive. It's what makes him a great lawyer. Anyway, we were at the third event of the evening, and I was ready to be done with it all."

"I know the feeling."

"I bet," he agreed with a soft laugh. "I was wandering through the gallery, trying to avoid small talk when I got roped into a conversation with one of the artists that was part of the show. He was excited about being there, and I let him show me his painting." Jared opened the door.

Jensen stepped into the office. There was a bank of three large windows looking out onto the front drive, a desk sat to the left of the door, with a small bookcase behind it. He noticed all of that, even as his breath caught as he looked at the art on the walls.

“I don’t pretend to know about art,” Jared said, walking to one of the paintings, “but I do know what I like, what moves me and this was one of those things. I couldn’t stop looking at it.”

“*Empty Land, Sunrise*,” Jensen said, moving to stand beside Jared. It was part of a series he’d done while he still lived in the Southwest. “That was you?” he asked, remembering that night, so many years before.

“It was,” Jared confirmed with a smile. “I bought it on the spot.”

“I don’t believe it.”

“Matt couldn’t either. He gave me a hard time about it because I’d never really shown a preference for anything to do with art. About six months later, we were back in Arizona and I went back to the gallery and there was another painting there—*Empty Land, White Light*. I had to have it. Luckily, I’d just moved to a bigger office and had space for both. I left instructions with the gallery to notify me of any new works by the artist and they called me when *Empty Land, Mesa* came in. I bought it sight unseen.”

Jensen had no idea what to say. He’d never been good at dealing with praise for his art. It was hard to explain that he had painted because he had to. There had been a time when he would see something—a place, the way the light played, clouds gathered in the sky—and he would have to paint it. If he tried to ignore the urge, it would make him ill. He unconsciously rubbed his hand as he thought about it. When he’d moved from the Southwest, there had been a whole new world to see and paint. The light was different, the mountains, everything and he’d spent the first two years they’d been in Washington either working at the farm or painting. “I…” he began then stopped.

“I have one more *Empty Land*, it’s at my office in the city.”

“Which one?” Jensen asked. There were nine paintings in the series, he had two, one was installed as part of a permanent exhibition in Santa Fe and the other two had been sold.

“*Lost*,” Jared said softly. “We were in Austin, having coffee before a meeting. I’d picked up a copy of the local alt newsweekly and I was looking through it while we were waiting. It had a listing of all the galleries in the area. I’d missed the opening of the show, and the chance of talking to the artist, by two days, but there was no way I was going to miss seeing what was there.”

“Both pieces in that show sold.”

“They did.”

“You?”

“Yes. When we got there, I spotted *Empty Land, Lost*, through the window. When we walked in, the gallery manager pounced on us, of course. Matt distracted him while I looked around to see what else was there. I actually walked past the other the first time. Once I looked at it, I knew it was yours even though it’s not your usual subject matter.”

“*Carrizozo Street*.” Jensen had painted it after he and Jeff had visited the small town.

“The only one I’ve ever seen with something other than just nature in it is the one in the entry to the café.”

“There are only two,” Jensen told him.

“Oh, good, Matt will be glad. He’ll stop worrying he only has part of a series.”

“Matt?”

“I bought *Carrizozo Street* for him.”

“Matt?” Jensen couldn’t believe it.

“It reminds him of the town by his grandparents’ house. It wasn’t in the Southwest, in fact he’ll even say it doesn’t look anything like the actual place, but the painting reminds him of it.” Jared grinned. “He’s also very good at confusing me.”

“I think I know what he means,” Jensen said cautiously, a little surprised. Matt didn’t really seem like the type that was sentimental.

“It’s in his office. He claims he’s there more than his condo. I work him so hard,” Jared added, rolling his eyes.

“I…” Jensen stopped. He wasn’t sure what he wanted to say. Finding out Jared knew who he was hadn’t answered everything, after all. It just opened the gates for a whole new set of questions. “Jared…”

Three things happened so quickly, it seemed like one. There was a flash of movement in the corner of his eye, the right hand office window shattered and something hit the desk, smashed into a coffee mug and dropped onto the floor with an audible *thump*. Before Jensen could react, Jared grabbed him and shoved him out the door as a second window shattered.

Sixteen

Sunday

Jared slammed the door shut as the glass was still falling in the office. The house alarm was blaring as Jared pushed Jensen through the kitchen towards the door to his apartment.

“Downstairs?” Jensen had to shout to be heard over the alarm.

“Yes! Right behind you,” Jared replied.

Jensen opened the door to his apartment and hurried down the stairs. He glanced over at Jared. The other man already had his phone out and was calmly responding to questions.

Without thinking what he was doing, Jensen pulled his own cell out and dialed Jeff’s number.

“Jensen?” Jeff answered on the first ring.

“Jeff,” he replied, surprised at how calm his voice sounded.

“What’s going on?”

“Someone threw something and broke the windows in Jared’s office.” Jensen stopped to take a slow breath, his heart was slamming against his ribs, and it was probably nothing more than a couple of rocks.

“Are you hurt?”

“No. Jared called the cops.”

“Okay,” Jeff said gruffly and broke the connection.

“The cops are on the way.”

“I suspect my family is too.” Jensen realized he was shaking.

“I told the cops we were down here and they said to wait here until they arrive.” Jared gave a shaky laugh. “Good advice, right?”

“A little late.” Jensen sank down onto the chair by the desk as Jared leaned against it. “I probably shouldn’t have called Jeff, but if they’d seen the cops pulling into the driveway with lights and sirens, they would have come over, made sure I was okay and then murdered us.”

“Seems counterproductive.”

“That’s what I always tell them.” Jensen tried for a smile. His hands were shaking so badly, he shoved them in his pockets.

“I wonder how long it will take...” Jared broke off when his phone rang. He glanced at the caller ID and rolled his eyes. “Matt,” he said, answering it. “I’m sorry about this afternoon.” Pause. “Yeah, that’s me alright.” Jensen could hear sirens approaching. Jared stood so he could see the windows and then put on a fake smile. “No, it’s nothing, I set it off by accident. Yeah. I’ll see you tomorrow at the office,” he said quickly, the sirens stopping as it got closer. “Night.” He punched the phone and stuffed it in his pocket right as someone knocked on the front door.

“Police,” the officer called.

“If he’s knocking, does that mean it’s safe?” Jared asked as he headed to the door.

“I hope so.” Jensen smiled when he recognized the man standing at the door. “Hey, Walt.”

“Jensen! What are you doing here?”

“I work here.”

“Quinn said you’d got a job when I stopped in the other night. I’m Walt Plunkett, Mr. Padalecki.” He paused for a moment. “Right. We need to get you out of the house.”

“What?” Jared asked.

“Immediately.” Walt waited until they stepped outside and were standing by his car. “Can you tell me what happened?”

Jensen leaned against the car as Jared related what had happened. He only half-heard him because the shaking in his hands had moved to his chest, even as he focused on his breathing and tried to stop the reaction. His brain registered the sound of another vehicle approaching. Taking another deep breath, he opened his eyes and looked up as Jeff’s truck and another police vehicle stopped. Jeff didn’t pause to greet Walt or Jared, he walked straight to Jensen and pulled him into a tight hug. Jensen leaned against his father and let himself shake.

Monday

The scent of coffee filled the meadow where Jensen was painting. The mountain was standing stark against the bright blue sky, a white sun hovering above it. He picked up the paint brush and set it to the canvas in front of him. A sense of joy, of completeness filled him. The scent of coffee got stronger and an ache he recognized as the physical manifestation of his grief worked its way into the scene. His hands started tingling, numbness filled them and the brush dropped from his fingers. He looked down to find the brush, but the meadow was replaced by wet pavement, blood mingling with rain, bone standing out against flesh and the shining street. “Jensen!” Chris shouted. He tried to answer, but the agony was filling him, a gash had opened on his hand. “Jensen!” The pain changed, it didn’t diminish, but not a million insects were biting his hands as he desperately tried to get away.

“Jensen!” Chris was shaking him as Jensen jerked away.

“Chris?” he croaked, still caught in the weird reality of the dream.

“Hey, you with me?”

“Yeah, sorry.” He blinked and looked around. He was in his bedroom at home. It took minute for his brain to catch up and replace the dream with a memory of coming back to the farm with his family the night before.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m awake. I’ll be down in a minute,” Jensen replied, sitting up and trying to dispel the last of the dream.

Chris put his hands on his shoulders and gave him a gentle shake. “You sure?” he asked, his voice full of concern.

“Yeah, I’m sure.” He patted Chris’ hand and after searching his eyes, his brother nodded and left. Jensen waited until he heard Chris on the stairs before swinging his legs out of bed. He felt fuzzy, the result of the meds he’d taken the night before. The adrenaline had overridden his ability to keep the pain under control and he’d taken not only pain meds, but something to help him sleep. As he opened the drawer to get a t-shirt, he noticed his hands were numb, the pins and needles sensation almost at the point of unbearable. There was a deeper burning ache in them as well, and his right hand was stiff and uncooperative. He sighed, hoping his fingers would function well enough to get his jeans buttoned. He was struggling with them, trying to remember everything that had happened the night before when he heard the murmur of an unaccustomed voice and everything fell into place.

The police had asked them to leave the area. It hadn’t been rocks, after all, but something else and the police were taking it very seriously. By then, he was really too tired to put up a fight, his hands had started to ache and he’d let Jeff drive him home. He hadn’t been paying attention to what was going on, so he was surprised when Jared’s truck pulled up at the farm shortly after he’d arrived. Quinn hopped out of the drivers’ seat and Jared had followed him into the house. Quinn showed Jared the loft while Jensen sat at the kitchen table, trying to ignore the ache that was fast becoming pain. Jensen should have known he couldn’t hide it from his family for long. Jeff brought his meds in and sat beside him at the table while they all had a cup of chocolate. Things got a little fuzzy after that, he remembered Jeff suggesting taking something to help him sleep too, and getting up. Maybe Chris and Quinn helped him upstairs? He wasn’t quite sure; he just knew he’d felt safe as he’d dropped off into sleep.

Jensen shook off the last of the memory as he went down the stairs. His family, and Jared, were gathered around the kitchen table. The coffee pot was beeping as he walked into the room. Everyone already had cups in front of them so it must be the second pot. Although, from the dark circles under his brothers’ eyes, it might be the third or fourth of a long night. “Good morning,” he said, grabbing the pot before anyone could get up. He poured himself a cup, then refilled the others’ mugs as well. “How’s it going?” he asked, sliding into his seat at the table.

“The horses have calmed down,” Quinn offered, after several seconds of silence. “Henry is helping by being overly bossy.”

“Henry?” Jared looked confused. “Who’s Henry?”

“The white and brown llama. He thinks he’s in charge in that annoying llama way. He’ll try to boss everything around, people, horses, birds, fence posts...”

“Fence posts?”

“He had quite an argument with one them by the barn. It didn’t move when he huffed at it,” Quinn said, laughing.

“No way.” Jared shook his head, laughing.

“It’s true. He huffed and spat and huffed some more,” Jeff added. “And nothing would convince that post to move. I think he gives it a spit for good measure every time he walks past.”

“Are all llamas like that?” Jared frowned and pulled his phone out. “Excuse me. Hey,” he said as he answered. “What? No.” He sounded panicked. “Don’t come by I...”

“Tell him you’re getting coffee,” Quinn whispered.

“I’m over getting a cup of coffee at Heavy Horses. He wanted me to try one more before he opened,” Jared said quickly. “Sure, see you in a few.” He hung up. “Maybe we should get over there and make some coffee before he shows up.”

The café always seemed a little lonely in the morning, like it missed people when no one was there. Jensen couldn’t help smiling at the thought. He’d mentioned it once to Chris and his brother had surprisingly agreed. The sun was slanting in the windows when they walked into the foyer. Quinn unlocked the front door, then headed behind the counter where the espresso machine was set up.

“What’s everybody drinking? I have espresso, Americano, latte, mocha and vanilla and caramel syrup,” Quinn said with a grin. “Actually, maybe I better make Jared’s first.”

“Let’s try your latte skills.” Jared stepped to the counter.

“Any flavor?”

“Not yet, I can get a better idea if it’s plain.”

“Sixteen ounce? With an extra shot?”

“You remembered,” Jared said, smiling.

“Remembering a regular’s usual order is important,” Quinn replied, casting a smirk at Chris, the smirk becoming a grin when Chris rolled his eyes and sighed loudly. “Would you like sugar or a sweetener?”

“Don’t you have any out?” Jared glanced around the area.

“Yes, of course, but someone told me it’s a nice convenience to offer customers.”

“That’s the right answer.” Jared chuckled. “Two sugars, raw if you have it.”

“Coming right up.”

Quinn set to work. Jensen watched, fascinated by the process. He’d never really paid attention to the intricacies of coffee making until Jared had given them the espresso bar. It was far more involved than he’d ever realized. It was no wonder that Quinn had needed a little help to get everything figured out. As Jensen watched, his brother had frown of concentration on his face while he damped down the coffee, set it to extract, steamed the milk and put it all together. He had just finished and handed the cup to Jared when Jensen caught the movement of a car in the corner of his eye.

“Matt’s pulling up,” he said.

“That was fast,” Jared muttered. He took a sip of the latte. “You might want to make the milk a little hotter. I like it this temp, but most people will want it hotter.”

“What if they order it extra hot?” Chris asked.

“Why?” Quinn turned to him “Why would they order it extra hot?”

“I don’t know, I heard someone order one extra hot once.”

The door opened and Matt walked in. He was dressed in his usual weekday attire, dark suit and expensive tie. He stopped just inside the door.

“Use the thermometer, like I showed you,” Jared said, pointedly ignoring the lawyer.

“Right, thermometer.” Quinn looked up like he’d just noticed Matt. “Hey, can I get you a coffee started?”

Matt narrowed his eyes as he looked at them. “Americano, twenty-ounce, inch of cold milk, one sugar.” He walked to where they were gathered. “Going casual today, Boss?”

“He called for help with coffee,” Jared said, smiling. “I didn’t know if I’d need to show him anything and didn’t want to get something on me.”

“Uh huh.” He raised an eyebrow. “He called at what, seven?”

“I said call anytime,” Jared answered smoothly.

“Uh huh.”

“You called pretty early, too, you know.”

“I thought you might prefer to work at home today, since your hands are burned. I was planning on bringing you whatever you needed from the office.”

“That’s a good idea.” Jared took another sip of coffee.

“I thought so.”

“Here’s your drink, let me know what you think.” Quinn handed Matt a paper cup.

“Thanks,” he said, accepting the cup.

“But?” Jared asked. “Because ‘I thought so’ usually has a but on the end of it.”

“But? But nothing.”

“Matt? Are you okay?” Jeff was looking at the lawyer with concern.

“I’m fine,” Matt began and took a long slow breath. Silence filled the room as he looked at each of them. “So, who’s going to tell me why there’s a police cruiser blocking his driveway? Or why I got a call that the alarm had been triggered? Or why it was still going off when I called last night?” More silence. “Anyone?” He met Jensen’s eyes. “Well?”

Jensen considered his answer. He could lie, but the lawyer had always been truthful with him and he regarded Matt as a friend. “Someone broke the windows in the office while we were in there,” he said flatly.

“Broke the windows?” Matt turned on Jared.

“Nothing serious, probably kids throwing rocks,” Jared said with a casual shrug. “They just wanted us out of there while they investigated.”

“Someone tossed a rock through the window, but the cops evacuated you.”

“Uh…” Jared glanced at Jensen, then at the lawyer.

“They evacuated you.” Matt carefully set his cup down. “*Evacuated* you… And you didn’t think that was important to mention that to ME?” The last word came out as an angry shout.

“I figured it was better to tell you in person, so you wouldn’t worry.”

“Too much. I quit.” Matt stalked across the room. “I quit, I quit, I quit.” He looked over at Jared, shook his head, shrugged and headed for the door. “I quit.”

Seventeen

Monday

The scent of bread filled the kitchen, mingling with the sweet smell of grass and flowers coming in the kitchen window. Jensen was heating the food Chris had sent with them when they’d let to return to the house. He was enjoying the quiet of the large kitchen. As he checked on the squash, he wondered how this had become his nearly-normal—sharing food with Jared in big kitchen. He pulled the plates out of the cupboard and grabbed two root beers out of the fridge. Every time he turned his back to the office, he felt a twinge between his shoulder blades, even though the police had assured them it was safe to return.

The police had called shortly after Matt stormed out and let Jared know he could return home. The items had been smoke bombs. After removing them, they had discovered one also had a dye pack that would have blasted ink on the walls of the room if it had exploded. Jared had asked questions, prompted by Chris and Quinn, until he seemed satisfied with the police report.

Once he was off the phone with the police, he'd tried to call Matt but the lawyer didn't answer. He left a curt message and had Quinn make him another coffee.

Shortly after they got back to Jared's, a repair crew for the windows had arrived. They said they'd received a call from a "Mr. Cohen" and were there to fix the damage in the office. Jared had tried to get more information about Matt from them, but all they knew was he'd called and requested a rush job.

Jensen knew Jared had tried to reach Matt several times during the day, but he hadn't answered his phone, or been into his offices in the city. Jeff had followed Matt out of the café and had stood talking for several minutes as Matt gestured angrily before he got into his car and left the parking lot in a squeal of tires. Jensen planned to ask his father about it when he called that night, but he guessed Jeff wouldn't talk. There was the "need to know" rule and the "need to not know" rule with his father and he suspected Jeff would class his conversation with the lawyer in the latter rather than the former.

"That smells good," Jared said, appearing in the door.

"I was just about to call you, it's all ready."

"Awesome." Jared plopped down on one of the stools at the island. "I'm starving."

"Me too." Jensen set the bread down. They'd had a late breakfast before they'd come back to the house, but they had both skipped lunch. "How are the burns on your hands?"

"Better. Not using them for more than dialing a phone all day really helped. They aren't even that red anymore." He grimaced. "They do itch like crazy."

"Remember, that's a good sign, it means it's healing."

"Unless you're the type to scratch until you bleed." Jared grinned. "I've been known to do that. The first time I was in Hawaii, I really sunburned. It was winter here, so the sun felt fabulous. And I cooked myself thoroughly. Matt said I looked like I'd been parboiled." He huffed, pressed his lips together and served himself food.

"Have you heard from him?" Jensen finally asked after several minutes of Jared huffing at his plate like Henry at the fence post.

"No," Jared replied, his voice tight. When he looked up his eyes were filled not with the anger Jensen had been half-expecting but sadness and worry. "He's still not answering. I know he's been on edge the last couple of weeks. Mother's lawyer has been a bigger pain in the ass than usual and Matt's been bearing the brunt of that. On top of that Collins has been cropping up where he shouldn't be more often than usual as well."

"Collins?" The name was unfamiliar to Jensen.

"Mother's lawyer's chief thug and my brother-in-law." He smiled without humor. "And yes, I mean thug. He was more than likely the one who damaged the sprinklers. I should have listened when Matt wanted to install cameras on the outside of the house."

"You think he did it on purpose?"

"Probably. My best guess is he was casing the place and noticed it was vulnerable and decided to see if he could make trouble."

"Why would he do that?"

"It's what he does," Jared said with a shrug. "I'm sure he does legit work for the Lehne as well, but in the last few years all my dealings have been less than pleasant. He's careful not to step over the line into illegal—at least not so we've been able to catch him. Matt's almost got him once or twice, but so far Collins has always managed to slime away."

"Slime?"

“Believe me, it’s the only word that works. The guy comes off as charming when you first meet him, in fact, that’s what led to him marrying my sister. After meeting him Mother started having him to dinner on Sundays and holidays. Which was fine with me, I stopped attending state functions when I was twenty.” He laughed bitterly. “I never suspected he was charming his way into the family until Mother informed me of the wedding. He’s been a thorn in my side since then. He loves to make trouble. It’s not surprising Mother’s lawyer employed the guy, they are two of a kind. They’ll look you in the eye as they shake your hand—and ram a knife in your ribs. I rather think my mother is hoping that will happen to me someday.”

“What?” Jensen set his fork down.

“Not literally, at least not anymore, at one time she thought she could take over everything, but when my father died, it turned out he’d out-smarted her years ago.” He shoved the food around on his plate. “She’d planned on inheriting everything, but for some reason, what he had, he left to me. It wasn’t nearly as much as she thought, they’d pretty much run everything into the ground by the time I got it.”

“They did?”

“Oh yeah. They blasted through the money the family had taken three generations to build up in less than twenty years. They were drunks, both of them, and mean ones at that. When I was a kid, I convinced Matt to take me home with him for the summer. I knew he was a freaked about it. His family didn’t have much, but I was fine with that, as long as it meant I didn’t have someone wandering the hallways looking for someone to hurt, and I was the most convenient someone. He didn’t believe me when I first told him about it, I think he thought I was embarrassed to bring him home with me. And in a way I was, but not because of him, because of them. He finally met Mother on parents’ weekend when I was seventeen. She decided to do the dutiful thing and showed up with her little entourage in tow.”

Jensen shifted on his seat. He surprised at the contempt Jared had in his voice when he spoke about his family.

“Of course, she was there because she’d heard about my coffee shop and wanted a piece of it. She told me if I signed over half, she’d leave. I nearly gave in when she threatened to tell everyone that...” He looked away for a moment. “But it didn’t work in the long run, the only person that really mattered to me already knew I was gay, and he didn’t care. Dad knew too, and it bothered him, but getting back at Mother outweighed any issues he had with me. When he died, I found out how deep that enmity went.”

“How old were you when he died?” Jensen asked, trying to digest the fact Jared had just casually outed himself and didn’t regard his own father as someone who mattered.

“Old enough. Actually, it was the day before my birthday. From what I was told, he’d planned on giving me one of his cars. He’d taken it out of storage and was driving it to the house when a tire blew on I-5. He went across the median and a semi hit the car. He was killed instantly. Mother loves telling me it was my fault. She was pretty happy about it—until his will was read. I was of age, so it all came to me—everything except what amounted to a very insulting pittance to Mother and my sister. I’d spent my life thinking she couldn’t hate me more than she already did. I was wrong. Since then, she’s tried to make a grab at the money numerous times. Dad had a good lawyer, the will was ironclad, and even after she involved her lawyer the great Fred Lehne, she couldn’t get at anything. The bastard even offered to handle my legal affairs. Once they realized that was fruitless, they started making trouble. Trying to take every...” Jared stopped and slammed his fork down. “Where the hell is Matt?”

“What?”

“Where the hell is he? I’ve left messages all day. He’s not like this. He doesn’t just not call.”

“Jared...” Jensen began, then stopped when he saw the look on the other man’s face. Jeff’s question *Jared or Matt* came back to haunt him as he desperately tried to ignore the twist of jealousy in his chest. His eyes slid away from Jared’s as he struggled with the sudden emotion. His gaze fell on the other’s hands, still pink from the burns. He took a slow breath, suddenly reeling from the loss of something he hadn’t even realized he wanted until that moment.

Eighteen

Tuesday

The air had a freshly scrubbed feeling in it when Jensen opened the door in the morning. It had rained overnight and water still sparkled on the plants in the garden. The lawn had perked up, the weeds now a deep green against the lighter green of the grass. There was a group of juncos hopping under the rose bushes, busily looking for food in the damp earth. The cloud cover was starting to clear, but the sun was muted and the air was cool. The ground was too wet to comfortably work in the garden, so Jensen had planned to spend the day in the stable. There was still a lot of cleaning to do before he could begin painting or any other projects in the small building and he was still toying with the idea of asking if he could use it as a greenhouse for the winter.

The clouds were hugging the foothills, wisps of white flowing like rivers in the valleys and Mount Rainier was visible in spite of the clouds. It was one of those days where the atmospheric conditions made it look more like a sketch on white paper than a mass of granite and glaciers. When they’d first arrived in the Northwest that effect had fascinated him and he’d tried to capture it on canvas several times. He’d never quite managed it to his satisfaction. Today was particularly beautiful and he wanted to capture it somehow. He pulled out his phone and snapped several pictures. His computer needed a new desktop image, and maybe one of these would do for that.

He pushed open the big door on the stable to let some fresh air in and went to grab the tools he’d left in the corner the other day. They were laying on the floor instead of standing up like he’d left them, a sign, no doubt, that there had been a small earthquake of some kind. He knew blasting at the quarry outside of Enumclaw often registered as a small quake, and the area around the mountain rumbled more than people realized. Before he picked up the rake, he pulled out his phone and opened the USGS earthquake site. Sure enough, there had been a small quake on Saturday, and that might have been enough to knock things over, even if he hadn’t felt it.

Jensen took a moment to survey the stable before starting. If he could get the worst of the debris out, he might be able to start fine tuning what needed to be done later in the week. His right hand was stiff, anything other than rough work was out for the day. He was glad it was too wet to weed, he wouldn’t have been able to do it anyway. He hated days like this, when his hand refused to function the way he wanted it to. In addition to the usual numbness, his ring finger and pinky would barely bend, let alone anything more involved. As usual, when his right hand was acting up, his left decided to get into the act as well and the continual buzzing pins and needles had progressed to actual pain and numbness. In fact, when he slid his gloves on, he noticed he

could barely feel the material against his hand. He always wondered how his hand could be numb and ache at the same time; his doctor had explained it in long medical terms, but it had essentially boiled down to “because” which didn’t seem like a good answer.

The damage to the nerves in his hands was, in a lot of ways, worse than the injuries that left him with an arm that didn’t straighten all the way and a hand that occasionally didn’t work at all. He could understand those issues and why they were there. Since those were caused by a physical injury, he could even hold on to the hope that, if he could ever afford it, it might be able to get considerably better. The other issue with his hands wasn’t so easy. It was the result of a medical mistake—a combination of the wrong drugs when the infection had first started ravaging his body and it had left him with destroyed nerves and continual pain. When he was honest with himself, he was willing to admit that was why he had tried to give the money they were setting aside for the surgery back to his family. He didn’t want to face the fact that the hope he might paint again wasn’t a reality. The surgery might fix the worse of the damage, but maybe it wouldn’t be able to fix his hands.

“This isn’t helping,” he said to the building and tried to shake the mood off. Getting things done would help, and there was a lot to do. He took a deep breath to clear the melancholy out of his head and started in on the pile in the west corner of the building.

It took nearly an hour of hard work before the mood completely lifted. Sometimes he needed the space to work it off, and this was one of those days. He’d realized part of it was worry for Matt. When Jensen had spoken with Jeff the night before, Matt still hadn’t contacted any of them. He knew Jared was almost frantic, and had heard him pacing on the main floor of the house well past midnight. Even though Jensen hadn’t known the lawyer long, it seemed unlike him to just disappear without a word.

Thinking of Matt brought him around the thing that had been haunting him since the night before. Jeff’s question *Jared or Matt*. He’d been attracted to Jared since that first meeting at the top of the stairs, although Jensen hadn’t been willing to admit it to himself. When Jared had casually outed himself last night, the small spark that had been burning since that first night fanned into a flame—only to be tempered by Jared’s obvious attachment to Matt. Jensen remembered his brothers asking him if the two were a couple, and he still wasn’t sure. Or maybe he just didn’t want it to be true. That brought him back to the beginning of the circle and the worry about Matt and around he’d go again.

“Hey,” Jared’s voice broke into his thoughts sometime later.

“What?” Jensen turned towards the door where his employer was standing.

“Quinn called, he said they haven’t been able to get ahold of you.”

“What?” Jensen pulled out his phone and tried to turn it on. “It’s dead.”

“They’ve been trying to call, and called me, since they knew I was working at home today.”

That came as a surprise since Jensen hadn’t known. “They did?”

“I might have called Quinn to see if they’d heard from Matt last night after you headed downstairs.” Jared walked into the stable. “I told them you were out in the stable and I’d come out and check.” He smiled and punched his phone. “Hi, he’s here, his phone’s dead. Yeah, hang on.” Jared stepped closer. “He wants to talk to you,” he said, holding his cell out.

“Thanks.” Jensen took the phone. “Hey.”

“Are you okay?” Quinn snapped, Jensen could hear an echo on the phone, Quinn must have turned the phone to speaker.

“Yes, my phone’s just dead. I thought I put in on the charger last night, but I guess not.”

“Are you sure?”

Jensen opened his mouth to say everything was fine, then stopped. A glib “everything’s fine” would set off warning bells with his family—even if things were fine. “I’m okay. I’m working in the stable since it’s too wet to weed.” He glanced at Jared. “And my hands are bad. I’m macroing instead of microing,” he added, using the terms Chris had coined.

“Have you taken anything?” Jeff asked, confirming the fact that Jensen was on speaker.

“Not yet. I was trying to work it out.”

“Have you taken a break?” Chris snapped.

Jensen rolled his eyes and heard Jared chuckle. “A break? Not yet.”

“It’s nearly one.”

“It is?”

“Yes, give the phone back to Jared,” Quinn ordered. “Talk soon.”

“After dinner tonight,” Jensen assured him and handed the phone back to his employer.

“He wants to talk to you.”

“Yeah?” Jared said into the phone. “Uh huh. Okay.” He looked at Jensen with a smile.

“Right away. Give me a call if... Thanks, Quinn, later.” He tucked the phone in the pocket of his jeans. “I just promised them I’d make you take a break, eat lunch and charge your phone.”

“Let me fini...”

“No,” Jared said firmly. “You’re taking a break now. I’m about to have lunch and you can join me.”

Jensen looked at the pile he’d been working on, he’d gotten a lot done, and his arm was starting to actually hurt. “I suppose they also made you promise to call if I didn’t take a break? Never mind, I know the answer.” He laughed, tucked the rack into its spot in the corner of the stable and headed towards the house with Jared.

Jensen stopped in his apartment to wash his hands and put the phone on the charger before heading up to the main house. By the time he arrived in the kitchen, Jared had bread, a variety of condiments, vegetables and a package wrapped in butcher’s paper on the counter. He smiled when Jensen walked in.

“I have salami from the butcher’s shop on the highway,” Jared said, opening the package. “I stopped in the other day to check it out.”

“Chris buys all the café’s meats from there.”

“What do you take on your sandwich?” He set two slices of bread on the plate.

“Everything but ketchup.”

“Are there people who put ketchup on salami?” Jared asked with mock horror as he put a sandwich together.

“I hope not,” Jensen answered, laughing as he sat down at the island.

“Me too.” Jared carried the plates over, set one in front of Jensen and sat down across from him.

“I did know a guy who put ketchup on pretty much everything.”

“Really?”

“When we were kids, there was a little diner down the road from Jeff’s house, we’d go there to have breakfast on Sundays. It was a community gathering place, and pretty much everyone showed up on Sunday mornings. There was a guy, he always seemed to end up in the booth next to ours, and anything he ordered got doused in ketchup.”

“I had a bit of a ketchup phase when I first got to school.” Jared smiled sheepishly. “I’d never had it before. Mother felt it was beneath us, so I’d never tried it until I went there. Matt

always has it on his fries and since it was a forbidden food at home I had to try it.” His smile faded.

“What are your plans for the stable?” Jensen asked, hoping to distract his boss.

“I hadn’t really thought about anything other than getting it cleaned up. I don’t have plans to get animals of any kind. It just seemed like a waste to tear it down.”

“It’s in really good shape.” He went to pick up his sandwich and his right hand wouldn’t close correctly. He’d already overworked it, and it was barely halfway through Tuesday. Trying to hide his frustration and embarrassment, he picked up the knife to cut the sandwich in half. Often that was a solution that would work, but today his left hand was an issue as well. The knife clattered to the table. “I’m sorry,” Jensen said, and slid off the stool, planning to make an escape into his apartment.

“Here,” Jared said at the same moment. He reached over, picked up the knife and sliced the sandwich in two.

“Thanks,” Jensen mumbled, sitting down again.

They were quiet for several minutes. Jared was looking out the kitchen window at the mountain and Jensen was fighting the rising sense of shame and helplessness that always hit him when his hands acted up. He’d known he was ignoring them while he was working in the stable, but he’d needed to work to break out of the mood. Was that true, though? More than once, he’d used that as an excuse when he’d worked too hard and had a set back with his hands, but sometimes he wondered if there was something else driving him.

“You…” Jared cleared his throat. “You need to be more careful.”

“I’m fine,” Jensen snapped.

“I don’t think so,” he said gently.

“I can do the work!” Jensen nearly shouted, trying to stop the emotion that was uncurling in his chest. It had been building up like water behind a dam, quietly, stealthy, almost unnoticed, but a force to blast anything in its way. He should have left when he realized he couldn’t use his hands. Losing it with his employer was probably not a good idea.

“I know you can, but you don’t have to do it all today or tomorrow or even this month. You have a lot of time.” Jared’s voice was patient.

“Why?” The question tumbled out.

“Why? Why what?” Jared frowned.

“Why did you change your mind about the property?”

“It seemed like a good solution.” His frown deepened.

“Why?” Jensen persisted. He needed to get out of there, when this started to happen, his mouth got way ahead of his brain and he’d said some things to his family that, were they anybody else, would probably have been unforgivable.

“I told you, Matt recognized you.”

“So it’s because of me?”

“Of course it is,” Jared said it like it was obvious. “I never expected you’d be the one to come to work here, though.”

“I’m the only useless one,” Jensen said bitterly.

“Useless?”

“Yes!” He spat the word out, then stopped before he could explode. “I have to go.” He turned and walked out of the kitchen without looking back. Once he was in the quiet of his apartment he wondered what the hell he’d just done. He was trembling as the reaction continued to build. If Jared fired him, they would lose everything and it would be his fault. The thoughts

spun around, bouncing in his skull. He sank down on the bed, trying to take a deep breath, but it felt like a band was closing around his chest, his heart hammering against his sternum. A sound wormed its way into the escalating reaction. Jeff's ringtone. Jensen fumbled for the phone.

"Talk to me." Jeff's voice was calm.

"Jeff," he said, surprised at how hard it was to get that single word out.

"Can you take a deep breath for me?"

"I..." He clutched the phone tighter. The attack was getting worse instead of better.

"It's bad," Jeff said, sounding muffled like he was talking to someone else. "Yeah, I think that's a good idea." There was a pause, Jensen thought he heard Quinn's voice through the increasing buzzing in his ears. "Son?" Jeff was back on the phone.

Jensen tried to answer, but it was getting the upper hand. He could barely hear his father's voice through the thudding beat of his heart.

"Jensen!"

He was starting to get lightheaded and closed his eyes as sparkles appeared at the edge of his vision. The room around him was fading, replaced by a dark, wet street. His heartbeat sounded like footsteps getting closer. The pain in his arm went from an ache to agony between one second and the next as memory started washing over him with the inevitable strength of a tsunami. The phone slipped from his hand.

"It's okay," a gentle voice said, a warm arm settled over his shoulders, anchoring him to the world. "You're okay."

Jensen shook his head.

"Breath for me, okay? We're going to count it, three for the inhale, okay?"

He focused on the voice, on the count and managed to get a breath on the second round of three. Slowly in and out, the frantic pulse in his chest and head backed off. The patient voice continued to count as the room came back. It was over as abruptly as it had begun and he sagged against the warm body propping him up. "Back," he mumbled.

"Welcome back."

Jensen was wrapped in a hug, secure and safe. This was the worst attack he'd had in months. He had no idea what had triggered it, unless it was a combination of things culminating with the broken windows two nights ago. Luckily, his family understood what was going on, and could get him out of the dark place the event would take him. It was times like this he knew how lucky he was to have his family, and how grateful he was for them. "Thanks."

"You're welcome." The response vibrated through the chest he was leaning against.

Several minutes passed before everything fell back into place. He'd been on the phone with Jeff when things had slipped. But if his family had been on the phone, then what had happened, and more to the point who... He opened his eyes and blinked. "Jared?"

Nineteen

Tuesday

The soft hum of the cooling system filled the room. Jensen was leaning against Jared's chest, wrapped up in a pair of strong arms. The attack was fading, even though his heart had accelerated a little again when he realized who was holding him. Yelling at his boss had been bad

enough, knowing Jared had seen him like this was...or should have been terrible. Now, he didn't know what to think.

"Jensen? Jared?" Jeff's voice came from somewhere by Jensen's feet.

"You should answer that, if you can," Jared said gently.

"Yeah." Jensen pushed himself away from Jared and picked up the phone from where it had fallen on the floor. "Hey."

"How are you?" Jeff asked, his voice full of worry.

"Back. Sorry. I don't know what set it off."

"I can think of several things," his father said. "Are you okay?"

"I think so, I'll eat something and see how it is."

"Are you sure?" That question in that tone from Jeff was one of the ones that they were not allowed to answer with anything but the absolute truth. Anything less than that was grounds for something Jeff had never really defined, but they knew it would be bad.

"Yes."

"We'll talk tonight," Jeff said. It wasn't a request.

"After seven," Jensen promised and broke the connection. He stared at his phone for a moment before looking over at Jared. "Thanks, and sorry." The thing that had been hovering at the edge of his awareness suddenly popped into consciousness. "Why are you down here?"

"When you uh..." He smiled wanly. "Something was wrong, and I wasn't sure what to do."

"You called Jeff?"

"Quinn," Jared confirmed with a nod. "He had Jeff call you while we were on the phone."

"That explains that." Jensen noticed the other man was frowning at him. "Oh, I heard Jeff talking to someone else."

"Yeah, they told me to come down." Jared looked away and fidgeted like he was uncomfortable. Jensen couldn't blame him either. If their positions had been reversed he'd be unsure as well.

"It was a good call. When those things get a good grip," he trailed off. He didn't like to think where *those things* had nearly taken him in the past. Eight months ago the only thing that had saved him was his promise to his family that he wouldn't "leave". It wasn't even a conscious thought, really, he just ended up in a very dark place. His brothers understood all too well, and so they had never pressured him for anything other than the promise. They both had given similar promises when they'd come home from the VA hospital and Jeff, in solidarity, had as well.

"Yeah." Jared said it like he knew exactly what Jensen was talking about. "Do you think you can eat?"

Jensen's stomach growled and he chuckled. "I guess that's your answer."

"Would you like the sandwich? Or?"

"That sounds great," Jensen said, flexing his hands. They were still stiff, buzzing and a little numb, but the emotional upset and release seemed to have helped them. He'd mentioned it to his family once and Quinn had gone into great detail about the workings of neurotransmitters and the brain. He'd finally grinned and said "sometimes shit like that help."

Jensen stood and waited for Jared to head out of the room. He trailed the other man upstairs and settled back at the island. Once Jared had sat down, Jensen carefully picked up the sandwich in his left hand and took a bite, aware Jared watched his movements closely. "Good salami," he said around a mouthful.

"It smells good," Jared agreed and took a bite out of his own. "Very good!" He grinned.

“Look, Jared, about what happened...”

“It’s okay.”

Jensen stared at his plate, letting things roll around in his head. “It’s the worst one I’ve had in a long time,” he said, making a decision. He needed to be open with Jared. “I get the shakes sometimes and I have nightmares, but nothing like that for a while.”

“It’s been a stressful few days maybe?” Jared offered.

“A little,” Jensen agreed. “More than that, though, it was seeing the painting, I think.”

“Painting?” Jared frowned in confusion. “Which one?”

“*The Mountain Before the Storm*. It was the last thing I painted before the attack.” He looked up. “In fact it was in the show the night it happened.”

“What... What did happen? I... uh... I remember seeing the news, but...”

“I’d gone out to take a break. It was crowded in the gallery, and I needed a breath of fresh air. I was feeling good. My family had come—which didn’t happen often, Chris and Quinn are not fond of crowds.”

“What about the café?”

“I asked them, when we were first opening and they said it was different, it was under control.”

“Makes sense.” Jared nodded for him to continue.

“I was outside, the gallery was near the alley. I wasn’t really paying attention to anything but what was going on in the gallery. Through the window, I could see Jeff talking to someone as they stood by one of the paintings. I just... I just wasn’t paying attention. I heard footsteps, but people had been coming and going, so I didn’t think much about it. It was just someone who’d parked up the alley or something.”

“But it wasn’t?”

“No, it wasn’t. I don’t remember much. They keep telling me that’s normal and it will fill in later, but it’s scary. There is this blank spot in my head.”

“How much do you actually remember?”

“Practically nothing. It had been raining, and the streets were wet and reflecting the lights. I was thinking about trying to capture that on canvas while I watched the group in the gallery through the window. There were cars on the road behind me, and water dripping from the drainpipe in the alley. I heard footsteps and I remember thinking whoever it was must be late, because they were walking fast. There are a few snippets, but the next thing I really remember was the ER. I’m not sure exactly what brings it back, but it’s like a page flips from the before to the ER with practically nothing in between.”

“So you didn’t see your attacker?” Jared asked, his eyes intense.

“Not that I remember. I might have, for all I know, but if I did, it’s a blank now.” Jensen sighed. “Believe me, the police asked, more than once.” He shrugged.

“You don’t remember him at all?” Jared persisted.

“No. Maybe if things hadn’t gone south, it would have come back by now,” he added bitterly.

“What do you mean?”

“The attack did a lot of damage to my right arm and hand. It was pretty much crushed.”

“Just the right?” Jared frowned in confusion.

“Yeah.”

“But...”

“Yeah,” Jensen repeated. “A couple of weeks after the surgery to pin, screw, chain, plate and otherwise metal me back together, I noticed my elbow was red. We called the surgeon and he had us come in and he drained it, said no problem.”

“I’m guessing it wasn’t that easy.”

“No, it wasn’t. The redness continued, and it started dripping a bit. Of course it hurt, but it was crushed and rebuilt so it hurt, you know? When it started dripping, Chris freaked out. He called a buddy of theirs who was a surgeon and had served with them. They were still on the phone when the family dragged me out to the car. I was in surgery less than five hours later.”

“What was wrong?”

“Infection. Jeff told me Dr. Boseman said he had to wash the wound out for more than an hour trying to get it clean. They had to remove all the hardware and it did a lot of damage coming out. Then, to top it off, I had a PICC line and IV meds for eight weeks. Only, they screwed it up at first—not my doc—but the hospital guy, and I had a reaction to the drugs they were giving me. That same drug caused some serious side effects including... Well, I had a tendon rupture, caused by the antibiotics—and long story short, both my hands are fucked, my feet too although I don’t notice them as much.”

“What?” Jared asked, a combination of horror and pity on his face.

“I’m more susceptible to staph now, too, because of it all,” Jensen finished.

“I... My god, Jensen... I...” He shook his head, his eyes bright. “Can they fix it?”

“Maybe the damage to my right arm.” Jensen shrugged. “I don’t really know. Sometimes I think I don’t want to really know.”

“What?”

“As long as the ‘maybe’ is out there, it’s a kind of hope. If I have surgery and nothing changes, it’s...” He trailed off, fighting the grief in his chest.

“I think I understand,” Jared said softly.

Jensen searched his face. “You do, don’t you?” he asked, hearing the surprise in his own voice.

“Yeah, not exactly, but yeah, I do.”

“I had this therapist, right after the mess started. I made the mistake of telling him something like that and trying to explain the fear of never painting again.”

“Mistake?” Jared prompted.

“He told me I could always tie the brushes on my hands like Renoir did.”

“Kind of missed the point, didn’t he?”

“He did. I tried it though, but it didn’t really work.”

“Why not?”

“For one thing, I am not Renoir. He was a master.” Jensen held up his hand when Jared opened his mouth. “It’s not some kind of self-sabotage or some shit like that. Renoir was in his nineties. He’d been painting for more than half a century. There is a level of skill, of muscle memory, that takes decades to learn. I just don’t have that much experience. Secondly, it’s uncomfortable enough that it is distracting.”

“You mean it hurts.”

“It does,” Jensen admitted, trying to stop the swell of shame. “And I tried a lot of different brush positions, but it was always wrong.”

“But you do a lot of heavy work with your hand.” Jared was frowning in concern.

“I do, it’s different. I’m not sure why. Stupid therapist thought it was all in my head.” Jensen looked at his hands, remembering the day he’d been told that. It had been one of the first

times his promise to not leave his family had been tested. The causal comment had devastated him. Somehow, having it said so blandly, so without care, without understanding, had taken his will to go on.

“What happened?”

“I was upset. I think Chris and Quinn went and discussed things with the guy. I never went back to him—and we never got a bill for it either.”

“I’m not sure I’d want to be on the receiving end of one of their discussions. Seriously, though, Jensen, does the work you are doing here hurt you?”

“Not more than usual,” Jensen answered truthfully. “That sounds more pathetic than it is.” He smiled at Jared. “Would you feel better about it if I gave you the same promise I gave my family?”

“Probably. What’s the promise?”

“I won’t purposefully hurt myself, and if I am having a bad day, I will adjust my work accordingly.”

“That’s fair.” Jared nodded. “I reserve the right to call Quinn, if I’m worried.”

“Oh fine, threaten me after I’ve given you my word.” Jensen laughed. “Thinking about work, I should head back out.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea considering...”

Jensen suppressed a sigh. All he needed was his boss fussing at him the way the family did when he had a bad day. “I need to do something,” he explained. “If I quit for the day, especially this early, today it won’t be good.”

Jared gave him a searching look. “I get it.” He stood and put the plates in the sink. “I need to get out of the house for a bit, I spent the morning on a teleconference.” He rolled his eyes. “And I need to do something else, I’ll come out with you.”

“What about the burns?” Jensen asked.

“That’s another reason I need to get out of the office. If I sit too long, I start to notice how much the damn things itch and, like I said, I’m a scratcher.” Jared chuckled.

“I need to stop by the apartment and get my gloves. I’ll meet you out there?”

“I’ll be there in about ten.”

Jensen headed down the stairs, smiling to himself. Even though his head told him Jared was coming out to take a break from work, his heart couldn’t help a little happy skip. He’d never been the kind of person to let his heart lead him, so he was trying to ignore the warm glow that had started filling him. Stupid therapist had even asked about it, why he was still single and if that meant he was afraid of his sexuality. Jensen had answered his honestly that day, without letting the anger get the best of him. No, he explained patiently, he was single because his energy had been taken up by his art. More than that, he’d never met anyone that he wanted to spend more than a month with, in fact his last few “relationships” had lasted less than a week. He’d known going in they were short term—so had his partners—and things had worked well. This feeling, this warmth, associated with Jared was new. It was entirely different. He might not be able to explain, exactly, what was different, but something was there, novel and unknown. It was exciting—and he wanted more.

Twenty

Tuesday

The stable was exactly as he left it, his tools carefully balanced against the back wall of the stall. Jensen wasn't sure why he found that comforting, he'd been gone less than two hours. As Jared said, things had been stressful the last several days, and maybe finding the tools knocked over this morning had meant more than it seemed at first glance. He tried not to sigh, he hated it when things like that happened, something small setting off a chain reaction to something big and out of control. It hadn't been that way before the attack, but now his brain would play tricks on him, and feed information that later would seem to be part of a pattern. There was nothing sinister going on in Jared's barn, he told himself firmly and pulled his gloves on.

"You've really done a lot in here!" Jared said, walking through the small door on the north side of the building.

"There wasn't that much to do," Jensen replied.

"I was in here when I bought the place. The stalls were full of shit—literally."

"It wasn't that bad. You should see the barn at home in the morning," Jensen laughed.

"What are you doing with it all?"

"I mixed a lot of it in the flower beds and I sent some home with Chris. I hope that's okay."

"Of course it is," Jared assured him. "What's the plan for the rest of the day?"

"Working on getting it clean."

"It looks pretty clean." Jared glanced around with a frown.

"I guess that depends on what you want to use the building for," Jensen said with an easy smile. "If you are going to keep tools in here, it's probably clean enough. If you want to make it into a guest house, it needs a lot of work."

"Guest house?" Jared looked puzzled. "Why would I need a guest house?"

"I don't know. I just meant, there are different levels of clean required."

"Ah. That makes sense, I guess. I haven't thought that far ahead." He grinned. "Where do I start?"

They had been working together for a couple of hours, when Jared's phone rang with a call from his office in the city. He'd excused himself and gone back to the house. Jensen worked for another hour before stopping and putting the tools away. He carefully closed the door and headed back towards the house. It had been raining off and on all day, and the mountain was completely missing, even the dark foothills were absent when he turned to look just before going inside. Judging by the cloud cover it might be raining tomorrow as well.

He took off his shoes by the door, and padded to the bathroom. After working in the barn all day, he wanted to take a shower before he settled down for the night. He turned the water on, letting it heat up while he stripped. Once he stepped into the spray, he let the hot water run over his body, relaxing his muscles. It felt like the damp had seeped into his body while he worked, creating small aches in various places.

When he finished, he put on a pair of sweats and a t-shirt and made himself a light supper before settling in front of the television. He realized how tired he actually was once he sat down. It was a good feeling though, not a dragging exhaustion, and he was satisfied with what he'd accomplished. As he ate, he kept an ear turned towards the door, trying to ignore the little tingle of anticipation as he listened. Even though he'd spent a lot of the day with Jared, he was already looking forward to seeing him again.

When his phone rang, he glanced at the clock with a guilty pang before he realized it was only six-thirty. He answered the phone quickly. “Chris? What’s up?”

“Hey, how’s it going?” his brother asked casually.

“Not bad, I just finished eating. I’m running low on bread.”

“I’ll send Quinn over with some in the morning.” He paused, his voice becoming muffled. Jensen guessed he’d put his hand over the phone. “Sorry, Millie had a question about the special.”

“Chris?”

“Yeah?”

“Want to tell me why you are calling in the middle of dinner service?”

“*Is that Jensen?*” Quinn’s voice came over the line.

“Yes!” Chris hissed.

“*Well? What did he say?*”

“I haven’t gotten to that yet.”

“You two know I can hear you, right?” Jensen asked, amusement warring with concern.

“Uh huh,” Chris replied.

“What’s going on?” Jensen said when his brother remained quiet.

“Uh, when was the last time you talked to Jeff?”

“Jeff? When we all spoke this afternoon.”

“Nothing since? No missed calls? Was your phone off?”

“No,” Jensen tried to stop the worry that was uncoiling in him. “I checked more than once, since I’d missed calls this morning.”

“You’re sure?”

“Chris! What the hell is going on?” Jensen demanded.

“Jeff got a call about two, he took off and we haven’t heard a peep since,” Chris confessed.

“Have you tried to call him?”

“Of course we have—about twenty times since we finished prep.”

“What?” The worry was quickly becoming something like panic. Jeff always answered his phone. “Who was the call from?” Jensen asked, putting the phone on speaker and checking his call log again, just in case he’d missed something after all. He wasn’t sure if he should be relieved or not that there was no call from Jeff.

“If we knew that, we would be less worried.”

“I’m supposed to call him tonight, maybe he’ll answer if he sees my number?”

“Yeah,” Chris said, his voice unsure. “Maybe. If you get through, once you’re sure he’s okay, tell him we’re kicking his ass when he gets home.”

“Right. I’ll let you know as soon as I hear something.” Jensen broke the connection and immediately hit the speed dial for Jeff. The phone rang four times, then paused before it went to voicemail. He hung up and tried again, there was still no answer so after Jeff’s cheery “*You know what to do*” greeting on voicemail, Jensen said, “Hey, checking in, it’s almost seven. Give me a call when you can.” He hung up and looked at the phone. In his whole life he’d left less than ten messages on Jeff’s voicemail. He texted Chris a quick message and wondered what to do.

After sitting in his chair for several minutes, his worry growing exponentially every time the clock ticked, Jensen tucked the phone in the pocket of his sweats and headed towards the stairs to the house. He wasn’t sure what Jared could do, but sitting alone in the quiet apartment

didn't seem like a good idea. As he reached the top of the stairs he smelled coffee. He knocked on the door then opened it.

"Hey, I was just about to see if you wanted coffee," Jared said, turning to him with a smile.

"Yeah, thanks." Jensen walked into the kitchen and leaned against the counter by the coffeemaker where Jared was standing.

"Milk and sugar, right?" Jared waited until Jensen nodded then carefully added sugar and poured milk while the coffee was still running into the cup. When it finished brewing, he stirred it and handed the mug to Jensen. "How did the rest of the day go?" he asked.

"Good. It's nearly done, although I have another load of, um, compost for the gardens."

"In between calls, I've been thinking about what to do with the building—to keep my mind off scratching," Jared said with a laugh.

"You have?"

"I have. It sort of worked too." He smiled and scratched his left hand.

"Did you decide on anything?"

"I did." Jared sat down at the island and gestured for Jensen to join him.

"What did you decide?" Jensen asked, trying to hide his disappointment. He'd been debating off and on all day about asking to make it into a greenhouse for the winter.

"To ask you."

"What?"

"You've obviously been thinking about it more than I have. I mean I never even thought about the fact it could be a guesthouse—or anything else really." He sipped his coffee. "So what do you think?"

"I... It's your..."

"What do you think?" Jared repeated, a half smile and a frown warring on his face.

Jensen thought about his answer, remembering his decision earlier to be open with Jared. "I did think it would be a good guesthouse. The hayloft could be made into a bedroom loft, there's piping, so you could plumb a bathroom."

"But?"

"But," Jensen laughed, once again seeing what made Jared a good businessman. "I was also considering it would make a great greenhouse with those southern windows."

"Greenhouse? Would it be warm enough?"

"Maybe more of a temperate house? Some place to grow greens, some herbs and maybe tomatoes, if there were a couple of heaters and grow lights instead of regular fluorescents."

"You have been thinking about it."

"Just idly. It would have made a good studio," Jensen heard himself saying wistfully, and wondered what had prompted him to say it, even as the words slipped from his mouth.

"It has a great view of the mountain," Jared agreed with a nod.

"It really does. The first day I worked in there, I kept getting distracted by the play of light on the hills."

"Which is why my office faces the driveway. I'd never get anything done if I had that to look at all day."

"I never get tired of looking at the mountain. It's always different. One day, I was out painting—actually they were more sketches than actual paintings—and I was frustrated because the light was changing, each second seemed to be something new. I was trying to keep up, but it was ahead of me." Jensen took a drink of coffee.

“Didn’t you photograph it?” Jared’s voice was puzzled.

“Photograph?”

“To paint?”

“No, I just painted. I guess it never really occurred to me. I tend to think of them as two very different disciplines and I never mixed the two.”

“Even *The Mountain Before the Storm*?”

“Especially that one. Since I stopped painting, I have taken a few photos. I took one yesterday, in fact. The mountain had that weird quality it gets sometimes when it looks like something painted on the clouds, rather than a mountain.”

“I’m not sure I understand that,” Jared said.

“Here.” Jensen pulled his phone out and opened the gallery, flipping to the photo he was talking about. He handed it to the other man.

Jared frowned as he looked at the picture. “You edited this?”

“No, not at all.”

“Seriously?” Jared asked incredulously.

“Why would I edit it?”

“But this is amazing!”

“It’s just a snapshot.” Jensen replied.

“This is not *just* anything. I must have seen the mountain hundreds of times in conditions similar to this, and I never once noticed what you’ve captured. I have several photos of the mountain at corporate and none of them are like this.”

“It’s just a snapshot,” Jensen insisted, feeling a little uncomfortable.

“No, it’s not. It’s something else. It’s like your paintings. It’s a moment, it’s a...” He waved his hands in frustration. “It’s amazing. Could I have a copy of this?”

“What?”

“I’d like a copy?”

“You’re serious?” Jensen couldn’t quite believe it.

“I am.”

“You can email it to yourself, if you want.”

“Thanks.” Jared fiddled with the phone, then handed it back.

“Sure.” As he went to tuck the phone back in his pocket, it rang with Jeff’s ringtone.

“Jeff!” Jensen answered quickly, relief coursing through him.

“Sorry I missed your call—and your brothers’. I’m okay, just haven’t been able to get to my phone.”

“What’s up? Where are you?” Jensen could hear music and voices in the background of the call.

“Is Jared with you?”

“I’m in the kitchen of the house, yes.”

“I’m with Matt.”

“Matt?” Jensen asked, glancing at Jared.

“He’s okay too, it’s a long story. I’ll call once we’re out of here.”

“Jeff?”

“I can’t talk right now,” Jeff said quietly. The voices in the background suddenly became shouts. “I’ve got to go before... Talk soon.”

“Be careful,” Jensen cautioned.

“Always.” The connection broke.

“Matt’s with Jeff,” Jensen said, setting the phone down.

“He’s okay?” Jared asked, his eyes bright.

“Jeff said they both were. He’s been gone since this afternoon.”

“Jeff has?”

“Yeah, Chris called while I was eating and asked if I’d heard from him. They said he got a call and left. Maybe it was Matt?”

“Maybe.” Jared pulled out his phone and looked at it. “Should I call?” he said more to himself than Jensen.

“I got the impression they were somewhere they couldn’t really talk.”

“Did he say where they were?”

“No,” Jensen said, considering the call. “He made a point of *not* saying where they were.”

“But Matt’s okay?”

“If Jeff said he is, he is.”

“And Jeff will keep him that way?”

“Yes,” Jensen answered firmly.

“You trust him?”

“Absolutely.”

Jared huffed out a breath. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean that to sound bad. It’s just, sometimes Matt gets—well he needs to blow off steam. It started when we were in school. I’m usually the reckless one, but every once in a while... And, you know, Matt’s family, the only real family I have.”

“I understand.”

“We met in school. I’d managed to get sent to boarding school. I’d been trying for years, and finally accomplished the goal when Mother and Leh... Well, she decided she didn’t want me around anymore. I was excited. Living away from the house I’d grown up in, no one wandering the halls, no drunks at dinner. It was awesome. My first day, I was escorted to my dorm room—it was small, two desks, two beds, a window that overlooked the square. It was awesome. I even had my own key, which was a big deal. And I had a roommate—Matt. We got along from day one, we were inseparable before the end of the first term.”

“He told me a little about that,” Jensen said.

“I was reckless; he was always there to keep me from killing myself with some stunt. He was the one who suggested the name for the coffee business.”

“But I thought...”

“It was because I was a predatory businessman? That’s the story we’ve encouraged.” Jared smiled ruefully. “The truth is a little less glamorous. My mother called me a beast when I refused to give her a share of that first shop. I still remember what she said word for word ‘only an uneducated, ungrateful, boorish beast would refuse his mother, especially for some *thing* the likes of Cohen’. We’d been roommates for years, and she still refused to call him by his first name, the same way she did with the help at the house. It hurt, even though I didn’t want anything to do with her. I talked to Matt about it, and he calmed me down. A couple days later, when she had her lawyer try and get part and I refused, it got ugly for a while. When she lost, Matt said something like ‘that will show them to mess with Beast and Cohen coffee’, and grinned at me. We renamed the shop Beast & Co the next day. Knowing she knows where the name comes from makes me happier than it should,” he finished with a feral smile.

Jensen wasn’t sure what to do with that comment.

“Matt’s been with me through everything. He knows more about me than anyone else, and is probably the only one on earth that gives a shit about me,” Jared said matter-of-factly.

“Jared,” Jensen began, then paused, not really sure what he’d intended to say. He looked down into the cup of coffee.

“When you told me Quinn was adopted, I knew you’d understand.”

“Chris is too.”

“Chris understands too?” Jared looked confused.

“No, adopted. Jeff took us in when we were kids.”

“He took you in? You mean you’re not related?”

“Not genetically,” Jensen said with a smile. “I was in foster care when I met Chris and we were at camp together and met Jeff. Quinn joined the family when he and Chris served together.”

“When I was a kid, I dreamed of getting taken away from my family and put in foster care,” Jared said, looking away for a moment. “Only when you’re a member of a family like mine, they can beat you bloody and no one will interfere,” he added bitterly.

“They beat you?” Jensen asked, aghast.

“They did. But only when they drank.” He repeated the last like he’d learned it by rote. “Like that makes any difference to a kid. Luckily, Mother got bored and decided to have an affair and wanted me out of the house, so they sent me to boarding school.” Jared smiled. “God, that sounds so tragic, but it was one of the best things that ever happened to me.”

“I get it, I really do,” Jensen said softly. “When I ended up in foster care, I thought it was the end of the world, but it wasn’t. It was really the beginning.”

“Funny how things turn out.” Jared reached across the island and covered Jensen’s hand with his own. “Jensen…” He began, then stopped as his phone chimed. Rolling his eyes, he pulled it out—and all the color drained from his face.

“What is it?” Jensen stood, something was very wrong. “Jared?”

Without saying a word, Jared handed his phone to Jensen. Glancing down, he felt his guts twist in horror. There was a picture of a mangled Mercedes and a note *Guess you’ll be looking for a new lawyer now.*

The hum of the refrigerator seemed loud in the kitchen as Jensen set Jared’s phone down, grabbed his own and called Jeff. After two tries with no answer, he texted his father, *Urgent, is Matt still with you?* The seconds dragged by until his phone lit up with an incoming text from Jeff. *Yes, we’re fine. Can’t talk right now.*

“He says they’re still together,” Jensen said, meeting Jared’s eyes.

“Then what’s this?” Jared demanded, gesturing to the phone.

“Forward it to me, and I’ll send it to Jeff so he knows what’s going on,” Jensen suggested.

“Good idea.” Jared nodded.

As soon as he had the text with the photo, Jensen forwarded it to his father with *Jared just received this* to explain it. Seconds became minutes as they waited for a reply, neither one moving. He was so focused on his phone, that when Jared’s chimed, it took a minute to register.

“It’s from Matt!” Jared said. A moment later he sagged in relief, and forced out a chuckle. “El mats.”

“El mats?” Jensen asked, confused.

“Not el mats, LMATS—Leave me alone, talk soon,” Jared explained. “It’s him. No one else would know to send that.” He carefully set his phone down and dropped his head into visibly shaking hands. Not knowing what else to do, Jensen stepped closer and put his arm

around Jared's shoulder, offering him the same comfort the other man had given him earlier in the day. *Was that only today?* Jensen asked himself. Jared leaned against him for several minutes before pulling away.

Jensen stepped back, still aware of the phantom heat of Jared's body along his arm and side. He stood there for a moment, feeling awkward and unsure, before he cleared his throat. "I'll, um, head downstairs. I'll let you know when I hear from Jeff."

"Yeah," Jared said.

The feeling of awkwardness increased, and he turned and headed towards the stairs to his apartment. He had opened the door, when a warm hand closed over his hand, fingers twining with his. He looked up in surprise, wondering how Jared had managed to get across the kitchen that quickly and that quietly. Jared met his eyes with an intense gaze and for a moment—a breathless moment—Jensen thought Jared was going to kiss him.

Instead he smiled, a gentle smile—intimate and open at the same time—and squeezed Jensen's hand. "Thank you." The words were heavy with unspoken meaning.

"Anytime," Jensen replied, returning the pressure on his hand. They stood that way for a moment more, then broke apart. He nodded to Jared, then headed down the stairs into the quiet dark of his apartment.

Once he was there, he grabbed a soda from the fridge, and settled in front of the TV. Despite the long day, he was keyed up, and didn't think he could sleep yet. His hands were hurting, but there was something else—the tingle of Jared's hand—that seemed to override the throbbing ache that was usually there after too much work. Things were buzzing back and forth in his brain as he tried to concentrate on the show that was droning away in the background. He was still thinking about it all, when the day caught up with him and he dozed off.

His brain registered that his phone was ringing before he was all the way awake. He fumbled for it and managed to answer before it went to voicemail.

"Sorry to wake you, son," Jeff said.

"It's fine," Jensen answered quickly. "Are you okay?"

"I am, Matt is. We're both at home. Why don't you and Jared come over for breakfast about seven?"

"Are you sure?"

"It's nearly sun-up and things can wait for an hour or two. I sent Matt to bed to get some sleep."

"Okay." Jensen squinted at the clock. It was nearly four-thirty. "See you then."

"Yep."

Jensen broke the connection and sent Jared a text. *Matt's at the farm. Jeff said come for breakfast at 7.*

Pick you up about five till. Jared's reply came so fast, Jensen suspected the other man had been awake.

Jensen got up and headed into the bedroom. He set the alarm and was asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow.

Twenty-One

Wednesday

The sun was peeking through the clouds when Jensen opened his door in the morning, letting in the rich smell of wet cottonwoods. Even though the sun was visible, dark clouds massed in the western sky and only the base of Mount Rainier was visible through the thick cover. A shaft of light bathed the foothills just to the east of the mountain. Jensen took a deep breath, letting the calm fill him. The events of the day before felt unreal in the crisp morning air, he'd even checked his phone when he first woke up to make sure the texts were actually there.

The quiet of the morning was broken by the sound of Jared's truck starting up and a few seconds later, the large, black pickup pulled around the driveway, stopping in front of Jensen's door. He locked the apartment and walked to the truck. Using the step, he pulled himself onto the seat and was still buckling his seatbelt when Jared put the truck in gear. The cab smelled like coffee and he was regretting not making a cup when he noticed there were two cups in the truck's cup holder.

"I hope you take your morning coffee with milk and sugar too," Jared said as he drove down the long driveway.

"I always do, except in emergencies."

"Emergencies?" Jared glanced over, a smile warming his face. "You have coffee emergencies?"

"I don't." Jensen laughed. "Jeff does. And when there is only enough milk for one cup, Jeff gets it. He's evil if he doesn't have his morning cups—plural."

"I can be too, depending on the morning." He laughed too. "Which is why this is my second cup. I'll probably need another three to refrain from murder."

"Jeff has a strict rule: no murder until after breakfast."

"Fine," Jared huffed, still smiling. "After breakfast."

Jensen picked up his coffee and leaned back in the seat. "This is a nice truck."

"Thanks. It drives the family nuts." Jared grinned.

"Why?"

"Pickups are for farm hands, or so I was told. If you are so ridiculous as to drive yourself, cars are allowed and some SUVs are okay, depending on the make and model. Trucks, just not fancy enough."

"They have no idea what a truck like this costs, do they?" Jensen asked.

"Doesn't matter. In this case, it could cost five times as much as a Rolls and it would still be unacceptable. Pickups aren't proper or seemly or some shit like that."

Jensen glanced at the other man as a thought occurred to him. "That's why you have it, isn't it?"

"Got it in one," he agreed with a laugh. "You'd think after a few years she'd get tired of complaining, but, nope. On the few occasions I see her, she always brings it up. I'm thinking of asking Quinn if I can borrow the horse trailer and I'll make sure I drive it where she'll see me."

"You should wait until he has a new rescue or needs hay."

"That's a great idea. I'll ask him when we're done this morning." He glanced over. "I took another look at that picture I was texted last night. It had to have been grabbed off the net. It might even be from a movie or TV show. If you look, there's a cactus just visible at the edge of the car."

"A cactus?"

"Yeah, I missed it the first time I saw it."

"Understandably, but why send it?"

"Part of the game. I told you Collins liked to make trouble."

“But that’s more than making trouble, isn’t it?” Jensen asked.

“No, because there’s no threat involved. It’s not the first time something like this has come up. Last time, it was a text to Matt. Just a picture, that time, no words, but enough to worry him until he could get a hold of me.”

“That’s...” Jensen trailed off, not sure what he wanted to say.

“Yeah,” Jared agreed as he turned on his blinker.

There was a sandwich board sign on the highway that read *Heavy Horses Espresso Now Open 6am to 11am Mon-Sat*. Jared pulled into the lot and parked in front of the café. The door was open and Jensen could see Chris standing in front of the coffee bar. Jared got out of the truck and waited until Jensen joined him before heading inside.

“Good morning, gentlemen, what can I get you this morning?” Quinn asked as they entered. “Our vanilla lattes are on special today.” He was wearing one of Chris’ kitchen aprons, blue and with white pinstripes and the Heavy Horses logo Jeff had designed on the front.

“I’ll try the vanilla latte,” Jared said.

“And you, sir?” He gave Jensen a cheeky grin.

“My regular,” Jensen said, returning the grin.

“Coming right up. Would you like to join our frequent buyer’s club? Buy ten and your eleventh is free.”

“Knock it off,” Chris said with a mock scowl, tossing a towel at him.

“Where’s Jeff?” Jensen leaned against the counter and watched Quinn make the coffees.

“In the dining room, currently growling his way through a pot of coffee. I had dough I wanted to get started and Quinn has his coffee thing, so we figured we could have breakfast over here. Thinking of food, I have cinnamon rolls in the oven. I better check them. Meet you in there as soon as the Wonder Horse here has your coffees done.”

“Oh ha ha,” Quinn retorted. “There goes your free refill.”

“I’m scared now.” Chris laughed and headed into the café.

“Here’s your coffees.” Quinn passed the cups across the counter.

Jared took a sip. “Good, that’s just right.”

Quinn beamed at him. “Thanks. Why don’t you two head in, and I’ll put the dinger on the door.”

Jensen walked into the café dining room and paused for a moment. Jeff was sitting at one of the tables in the back, a pot sitting on the table and his hand curled around a cup. He looked exhausted and Jensen noticed the knuckles of his right hand were swollen. “Morning, boys,” he said with a lopsided smile as they entered.

“Hey,” Jensen said, dropping into one of the chairs across from his father. “How are you?”

“Feeling my age.”

“Where’s Matt?” Jared demanded.

“He’ll be here, he’s moving a little slow.” Jeff looked up at Jared.

“I thought you said he was okay?” Jared’s voice came out low and dangerous.

“He is,” Jeff replied calmly.

“Why isn’t he here? If you’re lying...”

“Threatening people is my job,” an amused voice said from the doorway.

Jared turned to face the lawyer. “You quit your job.”

“Not the first time,” Matt shot back.

“True, but usually you’re done quitting sooner.”

Matt shrugged, then grimaced. "I had things to do."

"Things that included getting a black eye and bruised jaw?" Jared asked, frowning at him.

"Bruised ribs too," he said, walking slowly into the room.

"I thought you gave that up."

"Thought I'd give it a try again."

"You're a fucking idiot," Jared said as Matt reached the table.

"Takes one to know one."

Jared let out a sound that was half huff, half chuckle and pulled him into a hug. "I thought I'd lost you for a sec there." He let Matt go and steadied him when he swayed.

"I hadn't planned on the slimebag," the lawyer said, carefully lowering himself into a chair. "Where's my coffee?" he shouted, turning his head towards the door.

"Coming, sheesh," Quinn yelled back.

"Are you okay?" Jared asked.

"Just bruised. I don't duck fast enough." Matt grinned at Jeff.

"I didn't start it, so I had time to get out of the way," Jeff replied, smiling back.

"You finished it."

"There is that." Despite looking tired, there was a wicked gleam in Jeff's eyes.

"Why don't you two stop looking smug and tell us what happened?" Chris said, walking in, carrying a tray with plates, silverware and cinnamon rolls on it.

"Especially since some of us had been waiting *extremely* patiently since four," Quinn added, setting a coffee in front of Matt and dropping into a chair. "The smugness has been deafening." He looked at Jensen. "Very deafening."

"Very deafening?" Jensen couldn't help chuckling at his brother's aggrieved tone.

"Very." Quinn nodded.

"Let Matt get a cup of coffee under his belt, then we'll talk, alright?" Jeff glanced around the table. He waited for them to nod in agreement. "And maybe some breakfast?"

"Yep," Chris said, and started serving the rolls, passing the plates around the table.

They ate slowly, taking their time with the meal. Quinn got up several times when customers came to the espresso stand, and he brought them all another round of coffees. Conversation stayed on neutral topics even though Jensen could sense a growing tension in Jared. He was carefully straightening his silverware, his coffee cup then huffing, glancing over at Matt, huffing and straightening things.

"Something on your mind, Boss?" Matt asked after the six round of straightening and huffing.

"I promised I wouldn't murder you until after breakfast," Jared huffed.

A slow smile spread across Matt's face. "In that case, can I have seconds?"

Jared slammed his hand down on the table. "No!" He took a slow breath. "I'm sorry," he said to Jeff, then looked at the lawyer. "I've been worried."

The smile dropped off Matt's face. "I know. I was too. Getting evacuated because of bombs tossed in your windows is a little beyond your usual adventures."

"Smoke bombs," Jared corrected him.

"With explosive dye packs," Matt added.

"Okay, I should have told you when you called about the alarm going off. But it's just part of the usual thing."

"What usual *thing*?" Quinn demanded.

“The family thing.” Matt leaned back in his chair and glanced at Jeff, who raised his eyebrows and nodded.

“Okay,” Chris said, setting his cup on the table. “I think it’s time someone talked before Quinn starts breaking things.”

“Starting with heads,” Quinn agreed.

Jensen suppressed a sigh. Sometimes his family drove him nuts. No sooner had that thought popped into his head than it occurred to him he was thinking about everyone around the table as family. He wondered when, exactly, that had happened. “In the interest of preserving heads, furniture and dishes, maybe someone should share something?”

“I hadn’t really planned on anything when I quit,” Matt said with a half-smile at Jared. “I was pissed you hadn’t told me, and added to the fire and…” He trailed off.

“Oh no, no mysterious ands,” Quinn said.

“It’s okay, it won’t go further than this table,” Jeff said gently.

“Full disclosure, sir?” the lawyer asked Jeff with an odd look on his face.

Jeff’s mouth twitched and he chuckled. “Definitely.” He glanced around the table. “Tell them, you need more people in your corner.”

“You’re right.” Matt glanced at Jared. “I’ve been worried.”

“That’s not really news,” Jared said. “You’re always worried about something.”

“Lucky for you,” the lawyer said sourly. “He’s right, I do worry. I always have, but it got a lot worse when you were in the hospital eight months ago.”

“That was overwork or something,” Jared snapped.

“Hospital?” Chris asked.

“He collapsed at work.” Matt frowned.

“He collapsed?” Quinn looked from Matt to Jared. “What does that mean?”

“The doctors said it was overwork,” Jared repeated.

“The doctors,” Matt began, casting a look at Jared. “Said it was pneumonia, that was probably complicated by stress and exhaustion. The same doctors were extremely annoyed when someone, and I am not naming names here, refused all but basic tests and checked himself out against medical advice after two days—and was back at work before the week was over.” Matt looked exasperated.

“And I bought a house, I have a home office and I am using it,” Jared said.

“He has,” Jensen spoke up, suddenly feeling the need to defend Jared. “He even took time out of the office and helped in the barn yesterday.”

“The barn?” Matt quirked an eyebrow.

“He had to show me which end of the rake to use,” Jared shot back.

“Ahem,” Quinn said loudly. “Can we get back to the topic at hand?”

“Or tell us why you have a swollen hand and he has a black eye?” Chris looked pointedly at Jeff.

Jeff chuckled, and Jensen could see why Quinn was annoyed at the “deafening smugness”. His father sounded immensely pleased with himself. “There was a little disagreement over a game of pool at Dusty’s,” Jeff replied.

“Dusty’s?” Chris asked, glaring at their father.

“You were WHERE?” Quinn said at the same time.

“I don’t understand?” Jared looked at Jensen when no one else answered.

“Dusty’s is a dive up 410 towards the mountain. It has a reputation for being rough. Even the cops tend to avoid the place. A couple years ago a group of gangbangers from Seattle went on

a robbery spree up here. They hit four places, then made the mistake of wandering into Dusty's. The cops picked up what was left after the bartender called. It's not the kind of place you want to have little disagreements."

"It's really not," Matt agreed amiably.

"Nope," Jeff added with a smile.

"See? See why I want to kill them?" Quinn turned to Jensen and Jared. "This has been going on since four!"

Jensen couldn't blame his brothers for their frustration. "Jeff?"

"You're right, Jensen, explanations are due. Matt asked for my help."

"Actually, he offered it the day I quit. I took him up on it last night," Matt said.

"And all of this is supposed to explain why you were starting things at Dusty's?" Chris snapped.

"In a way," Matt continued. "I was chasing some information and I thought I'd need back up."

"That's where I come in," Jeff picked up the story. "He called me and told me where he was going, and I headed out to make sure he didn't do something stupid."

"Which I did." Matt grinned.

"I think I told you that wasn't the way to do it."

"You have to admit it worked."

"After we busted a few heads." Jeff grinned. "He didn't duck in time."

"It looks like he didn't duck in time more than once," Quinn said sarcastically.

Jared made a sound that was half huff, half growl.

"I know, I said I was going to stop doing that. I hadn't really planned to end up in a bar brawl," Matt said. "When I called Jeff and told him I was going to Dusty's, he put his foot down and said he was coming. I didn't call you, because it was too big a risk."

"Since when is that okay?" Jared's voice was hurt.

"When I think your life is in danger?"

"What?" Jared asked, looking shocked.

"That's a little dramatic, isn't it?" Chris asked, raising his eyebrows. "I mean specifically him. Everyone's life's in danger when they are stupid enough to start shit at Dusty's." He glanced at Quinn and Jensen, then back at Jeff. "Especially when someone said they weren't going to start shit to blow off steam anymore."

"Oh no," Jared sighed. "Jeff too?"

"Yeah," Quinn answered.

"Seriously?" Jared rolled his eyes. "Great."

"Now we have two of them," Quinn agreed.

"Can we get back to why they were at Dusty's? I assume it was for more than just getting into a brawl?" Jensen could feel a storm brewing around the table and hoped to cut it off.

"It was. Go ahead, tell them." Jeff nodded at Matt.

"I'd been asking around about the smoke bombs, to see if I could track down where they came from."

"We kind of know that, it has to be them," Jared pointed out.

"It's obviously them. However, if we could prove one of them purchased the stuff, it would be enough to finally take action on and get rid of them once and for all." Matt picked up his coffee cup and took a sip.

“Wait, are you saying Jared’s family tossed smoke bombs through the window?” Chris asked. “Why?”

“My guess?” Jared replied. “To ruin the pictures.”

“What pictures?”

“My art collection. I have several paintings in my office, and they’re visible from the windows.”

“Why would they want to do that?” Quinn frowned at him.

“Because.” Jared looked uncomfortable.

“They like to destroy things. We just haven’t been able to link them to the actual events. That’s why I was chasing those smoke bombs. If we could prove Collins bought them, we’d have something concrete to use,” Matt explained. “One guy I talked to said there was a guy at Dusty’s who made ‘custom’ things like that, so I called Jeff and we headed out there to see if we could talk to him.”

“And we did.” Jeff was looking pleased with himself again. “After a little chat over the pool table.”

“A chat.” Jensen didn’t believe that.

“Chat, tiny fight…” Jeff shrugged.

“Did you find anything out?” Jared asked.

“He couldn’t—or wouldn’t—give me a solid description. Not enough to know who it was, but he did agree to call next time they were in contact.”

“How hard did you have to hit them to accomplish that?” Chris sighed.

“Not hard at all, not once Matt did his scary lawyer thing,” Jeff said.

“It was Jeff.” Matt looked sheepish.

“No, it really wasn’t. He’s terrifying when he starts flinging legal threats around.”

“Non-binding suggestions,” the lawyer said with a grin.

“Right, those. Whatever, it worked. The guy spilled his guts, so maybe it’s a real starting point in all this.”

“It could be,” Jared agreed.

“This doesn’t explain all the smug,” Quinn grumbled.

“Oh, that’s because we were saving the best for last.” Jeff grinned at Matt and they saluted each other with their coffee mugs.

“What best part?” Jensen asked before Quinn could snap.

“We’re bad news, I guess.” Matt chuckled.

“Oh no, what did you do?” Jensen frowned at his father.

“We, yes, *we* were barred from Dusty’s.” Jeff laughed.

Everyone groaned. Jensen sighed. Yes, his family drove him nuts at times.

Twenty-Two

Wednesday

Chaos had erupted around the table. Jensen wasn’t surprised, honestly he was surprised it took nearly three minutes after the two had admitted to getting barred from Dusty’s for the shouting to start. He’d tried to get a word in once or twice, but had finally given up to let everyone get the shouting out of their system. It was the way things worked sometimes and he

was used to it. Matt and Jared had joined in with all the energy of the rest of the family. As near as Jensen could tell, Chris and Quinn were shouting about “just exactly how” Jeff and Matt had managed to get themselves banned. Jared was shouting as the details came out and Jeff and Matt were defending their actions—although their smug tones occasionally increased the volume from the others.

After half an hour, things still hadn’t shown any sign of quieting down, so Jensen stood, gathered the dishes and put them on the tray with the empty coffeepot and carried them into the kitchen. Knowing the way things usually went, one of two things would happen. Either things would calm down fairly quickly, or they would continue at the same rate for a couple of hours. He never could guess which would happen. At one time, he thought he’d figured it out, but after testing his hypothesis several times it had proven false.

The volume of voices in the dining room hadn’t diminished, so he walked to the door and opened it, looking out onto the garden, wondering if he should start harvesting for service that evening. At the rate things were going, the rest of the family was going to be preoccupied for a while. He grabbed one of the baskets off the counter and headed into the tomatoes.

The peace of the garden surrounded him as he set to work and let his mind wander. He worried about Jeff’s occasional “letting off steam” behavior. His father had been doing since Jensen was a teen. Although, both he and Chris suspected that it had been going on for a long time before that. One night when Chris was home on leave, Jeff had gotten drunk—one of only three times in their lives—and told them sometimes pain was the only way he could exorcise the demons that haunted him. It had gotten better over the years, but it still happened now and then. From what Jared had said the night before and this morning, it seemed like Matt had something of the same thing going on.

“Need help?” Jared asked from beside him. Jensen had been so lost in thought he hadn’t heard him approaching.

“Sure,” Jensen replied with a smile. “Are they still at it?”

“Yes,” Jared huffed.

“Don’t worry, they’ll yell themselves out soon.”

“Does this happen a lot?” Jared turned to face him, a frown curling between his brows.

“Yes and no. This is a little louder than usual, because everyone was worried about the two of them and they’re venting it now that they know those two are not only okay, but were up to no good.”

“Sorry about that,” Jared said ruefully.

“Sorry? About what?”

“Matt. It sounds like he was the...” Jared sighed and stared at the tomatoes like they had an answer. “He’s done this for as long as I’ve known him. In fact, right after we became roommates, he got into it with one of the school’s bullies. He had a detente with them for the most part. I’m still not exactly sure what set it off, he came out of the fight bruised and bloody—two ribs were broken. That particular bully was expelled and Matt was on detention for a month. Of course for a week of that, he barely made it from bed to class and back. I thought it was a one-time thing.”

“It wasn’t?” Jensen asked gently.

“No, it doesn’t happen often, but it happens. I’m sorry he involved Jeff.”

“I was about to apologize for Jeff involving Matt.” Jensen laughed. “It’s not his first rodeo either.”

“Getting them together might have been a mistake,” Jared said softly. Jensen wasn’t sure if he the other man was sad or merely resigned.

“Maybe, but maybe not.” Jensen started picking tomatoes and after a moment Jared followed suit.

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know about Matt, of course, but Jeff made it home in considerably better shape than usual, and it seems like it wasn’t just random violence on their part. They were there to get information.”

“I hadn’t thought about that. You’re right. Matt’s not as bad as usual either.” Jared suddenly smiled, the smile sparkling in his eyes. “Of course, he’s not usually this pleased with himself.”

“That would be Jeff’s influence.” Jensen smiled back. “He can be unbearable sometimes.”

“I can see that.” Jared chuckled. “These are good tomatoes.” He popped one in his mouth and dropped several in the basket.

“I like this variety,” Jensen agreed.

“If you used the stable as a greenhouse could you grow these?”

“I think so. I’ve never actually tried it, I’ve used cold frames, though, to extend the season.”

“Might be worth trying. I could live with garden fresh tomatoes all winter.”

They worked together in companionable silence for almost half an hour. When the basket was full, Jensen set it aside and led the way to the herbs. He wondered what Chris planned for the menu. Almost all the annuals needed serious trimming. Another half row of cilantro was getting ready to bloom. He could probably get a couple more days of leaves before they started to change flavor enough for Chris to veto them for use as a fresh herb. The purple basil, more sensitive to cool weather, was starting to look a little tired. It was nearing the end of the season, maybe another week or two and it would be done for the year. Fall was approaching and it would be time to get the cool and cold weather plants in as well as get the cold frames set up.

“What are those?” Jared asked, pointing to the row of oversized pots along the wall of their small storage shed.

“Potatoes. Growing them like that lets us maximize productivity and minimize space.”

“Aren’t potatoes pretty cheap?”

“They are, but these are varieties that are hard to find or expensive—blue, all red, and other heirlooms.”

“Can you actually grow enough?” Jared walked over to look at the pots.

“You’d be surprised. I know I was,” Jensen said. “The whole thing is full of them. We start with the seed potatoes on the very bottom, then as the plant grows, you cover it with soil so at the end of the season you have a lot of them in a very small, easy to harvest area.”

“No digging?”

“Not really, we tip them over, starting with the one closest to the shed.”

“That was the only chore that I didn’t like at Matt’s grandparents’ house—digging potatoes. It seemed like a lot of work for not much, compared to picking berries.”

“They aren’t as good to snack on while harvesting either,” Jensen added with a grin.

“True. I tried, but I am not a raw potato kind of guy, I guess.”

“Raw? Really?”

“Yeah, we saw it in a black and white movie. Gary Cooper, I think. He was eating a potato and of course we had to try it.”

“Of course.” Jensen couldn’t help chuckling. “More than one old movie got us into trouble when we were kids.”

“Us too,” Jared said with a wistful smile. “We watched them on an old console TV at Matt’s grandparents’. It was so much better than the house I grew up in. I loved those summers.” He glanced away for a minute, then cleared his throat. “Should we check on them? Or keep going?”

“Let’s take the basket in, if they’re still shouting, we’ll come back out.”

They walked over to the tomatoes and Jared retrieved the full basket and they headed into the café. When they reached the kitchen, there was only the murmur of voices in conversation from the dining room, so they went in.

“There you are,” Jeff said, smiling as they walked across the room. “I was going to send Quinn out to get you.”

“How about make another coffee instead?” Jared asked, dropping into a chair.

“Sure.” Quinn stood. “You want the same? Or?”

“Americano, with milk and sugar. I’ll buy for the table,” he added with a grin, handing Quinn a couple of twenties. “And don’t even think about giving that back.”

“Everyone else want the usual?” Quinn waited for everyone to nod before heading out into the entry.

“You settle things?” Jensen asked. “Or is this halftime?”

“It’s settled for now,” Chris said, frowning at Jeff.

“For now,” Jeff repeated with a grin.

“We need time to find a new dive.” Matt returned the grin.

“Matt...” Jared began and huffed out a breath.

“I think both of you should take the day off today, and maybe tomorrow as well,” Jeff said, cutting him off. “You’ve had a few long days and neither one of you is fit for an office right now.”

“He’s right, Jared,” Matt said softly. “I think we’re getting jumpy. We’ve been going without a break for quite a while and don’t tell me you haven’t. House or no house.”

Jared took a breath and looked like he was going to lose his temper, but he suddenly deflated. “You’re both right. I’ll call the office and tell them we won’t be in for the rest of the week.” He frowned at Matt when he started to open his mouth. “Oh no, you are off for the week. If I am you are. I can move that meeting on Friday to a teleconference, half of it is getting Skyped in anyway.”

“They find me anyway.” Matt sighed.

“You’re off.” Jeff’s voice was firm. “You can damn well stay here if they’ll bug you at home. Call in and then hand me your phone.” He waited for a moment. “I’m serious.”

“That’s a great plan!” Chris agreed.

“What is?” Quinn asked, walking in with their coffees in a carry-out tray.

“Matt stays here for the rest of the week to recover,” Jeff explained.

“Good, I was going to suggest something like that, since I suspect he’s the type to ignore his health.” Quinn set the coffees on the table and sat down.

“Everything I know about that, I learned from him.” Matt lifted his cup towards Jared.

“He’s not wrong there.” Jared smiled.

“So it’s settled,” Jeff said. “Matt can stay here for the rest of the week. You can help harvest if you feel up to it, or keep me company in the field if you don’t.”

Matt was quiet, a small frown on his face. He glanced at Jared, who met his eyes, and nodded. “I’ll take you up on that,” Matt said. “As long as he promises to be completely away from his phone too.”

“It’s a deal.” Jared held out his hand so Matt could shake it. “Jensen’s taking the day off too.”

“I can use it to catch up on things here.” Jensen started thinking about things that needed to get done.

“I said off,” Jared snapped.

“What?” Jensen asked, surprised by the ferocity in Jared’s voice.

“You’re taking the day off too.”

“The basil and cilantro…”

“Nope,” Chris said.

“What?” Jensen frowned at his brother. “But…”

“You heard the nope,” Quinn added.

“But Matt can’t…”

“Don’t drag me into it!” The lawyer raised his hands.

“You need a day off, Jensen, you know you do.” Jeff leveled the look at him. “And you *will* take it, do you understand?”

“Jeff…” Jensen stopped.

“Just to be sure, I’ll take him for a drive. I’ve been waiting for a chance to go up to Crystal for lunch. We’re going. How’s that?” Jared asked Jeff, not Jensen.

“I’ll accept that plan.” Jeff beamed at Jared.

“Good, let’s finish coffee and then we can head out.”

“But,” Jensen said, fighting the feeling of helplessness that always happened when he felt useless.

“It’s the only way to keep him out of his office and he knows it,” Matt said, leaning over so only Jensen could hear him.

“Okay.” Jensen could do that—after all that was helping in a way. He leaned back in his chair and took a sip of coffee, trying to ignore the warmth growing in his chest, thinking about a day off with Jared.

Twenty-Three

Wednesday

The sun had burned the clouds away by the time Jared pulled out of the parking lot at the farm. Jensen leaned back in the seat, watching the mountain behind the cottonwoods that lined the road. The highway swung in an arc as it went through Buckley and over the bridge on the White River. Jensen automatically glanced up river, checking the level of water. The gravel “sandbar” was visible, but the river wasn’t low, even though it had been fairly dry over the last month. As they drove through Enumclaw, Jensen opened the camera app on his phone. There was a pasture on the north side of town that had an amazing view of the mountain, framed on one side by Mount Peak.

“The mysterious moving mountain,” Jared said.

“What?” Jensen glanced over at him, then back at the mountain. They were in front of the pasture so he snapped a few pictures.

“It’s behind us as we leave Buckley, then back almost in front of us on this side of Enumclaw.”

“Quinn mentioned that the first time we drove this way,” Jensen said with a smile. “I love how the face changes as you drive this way, it’s almost like an entirely different mountain.”

“It really is. Have you been to Crystal Mountain?”

“No, I’ve driven up that way, but tend to stop in Federation Forest or at Skookum Falls.”

“I’ve been up there skiing, but not at this time of year. There’s a restaurant at the summit. You can see Rainier—and all the other peaks. Um, you aren’t afraid of heights are you?”

“Not as much as I used to be, why?” Jensen asked, looking out the window as they passed the golf course and started climbing up the “hill” towards Chinook Pass and Mount Rainier. The golf course was at the end of town and was the end of “civilization” for many miles. The tiny town of Greenwater and the various ski villages were much further up the highway.

“There’s a gondola to the summit.”

“I can always close my eyes.” Jensen tried to hide his nervousness. It was true, he wasn’t as bothered as heights as he once was—but that didn’t mean riding in a gondola sounded like a good idea. “It hasn’t plummeted to the ground yet,” he added more to himself than Jared.

“That’s what I tell myself every time I’m on a ski lift. I love to ski, hate the lifts. Have you ever been to Mud Mountain Dam?”

“Yes?”

“I’ve driven by the sign for years on the way to the slopes.”

“There’s a park. It’s popular with locals. They have a playground and wading pool with fountains and there are picnic tables. There’s an overlook of the river and trails down to the river and along the rim. It’s nice in the early morning before it fills up.”

“We’ll have to go up one morning before work,” Jared said softly. Jensen wasn’t sure if he was supposed to have heard the comment or not. “It’s pretty up here,” he said a moment later.

“It is. I drive up this way when things get stressful and I need to go someplace.” That was hard to explain. Sometimes he just had to go—somewhere, anywhere—it didn’t matter where. Since the attack, he would occasionally be consumed by the need to move, to go. He tried explaining it to Stupid Therapist, but had been met with a brick wall of misunderstanding. It was one of the first signs he was entirely the wrong therapist for Jensen, but he’d tried to stick it out, thinking it was him and not the therapist. In a way, it had made him feel like a freak. He would be completely consumed, there was no other word for it. It filled him up, became almost an obsession, until he could go. That was something else he’d had a hard time explaining. *Going* wasn’t to anyplace specific.

Early one morning Chris had stopped him when he was on the way out to take a drive. Jensen wasn’t supposed to be driving yet, he’d only been home for a week, but he’d been unable to rest and slept fitfully, the urge to go starting to bridge on obsession. He’d tried to resist it, tried to calm down. He’d slipped outside and walked out to the shed and watched the stars start to fade, and still couldn’t shake the need to go. Jensen had just grabbed one of the sets of keys off the hook by the door when Chris had caught him. Jensen had stammered out what was going on and Chris had nodded and grabbed their coats. He said he understood what was going on, and knew Jensen *had* to go, but until the doctors said it was okay to drive, he extracted a promise that Jensen would let one of them know and let them drive. They’d driven up 410, the sun slowly bathing the mountains in light.

“What’s wrong?” Jared’s voice cut into the memory.

“Nothing.”

“You got quiet all of a sudden.” He sounded worried.

“Nothing’s wrong,” Jensen assured him. “When I was first out of the hospital, we would come up here. Jeff and I discovered the trails at the Federation Forest interpretive center. I wasn’t really strong enough to walk far, but the paths are level and pretty clear of roots and things like that, so I could walk far enough to get away from the sounds of people.”

“That makes sense, after... what happened.”

“That did have a lot to do with it,” Jensen agreed, “but it was also getting away from people. Chris and I lived in the city before we met Jeff. We had foster families—big ones—foster parents were hard to come by. When we moved in with Jeff it was just the three of us, and he lived at the edge of park land, so we had miles and miles and miles of nothing but desert as a backyard. We spent as much time ‘in the wilderness’ as Jeff would say as we could. Once we moved here, it was kind of the same thing. There are more people around, but it’s still rural, and it’s so quiet. The hospital was the antithesis of all that, there were people there all the time, it was noisy, it was always too bright.” He cleared his throat. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay, I get it. I was only in the hospital for a couple days and it was too much. I’m busy at work, but I’m used to being left alone when I tell people to leave me alone.” Jared laughed. “Well, except for Matt.”

“Family’s like that.” Jensen laughed along with him and watched the landscape rush by.

The view from the summit was worth the somewhat terrifying trip to get there. Jensen knew, objectively, the gondola was safe, it was hard to convince his subjective self of that when they were hanging above the ground, even the tops of the trees far below the gondola car. He’d spend a lot of the trip with his eyes fixed on the floor, or on Jared’s face while they were talking. It wasn’t until nearly the end when he’d dared to look out the windows and had been transfixed by the view. He could see Mount Baker far the north and the broken face of Mount Saint Helens to the south, but what kept taking his breath away was the view of Rainier. It was a view he’d never seen and it filled him up. Somehow the mountain looked bigger and smaller at the same time.

When they got off the gondola, he stood motionless, looking at the mountain. The beauty of the landscape seemed summed in Rainier. There was a tiny wisp of clouds blowing over the top, not enough to be a lenticular cloud, but enough to mimic the shape of the peak, making it seem even taller. Even here, at, according to the sign almost 6,900 feet, the mountain was still grand, the glacier covered slopes dropping gracefully to the hills surrounding it. It dwarfed everything around it, but still seemed small and somehow vulnerable in the immensity of the landscape. It was humbling.

The urge to paint was suddenly overwhelming. To capture this moment on canvas, to let the beauty of the world flow down his arms and into paint filled him. His hands were shaking and the fingers of his right hand were starting to cramp. The tendon pulling the little finger away from his hand with sudden and stunning agony. The need to paint, the thing he wanted to paint and the pain in his hand were beginning a spiral that didn’t happen as often as it had, but could still paralyze him. He heard his breathing change as it all tried to get a hold on him.

Then a warm hand clasped his, strong fingers gently massaging where he knew there was a visible line on his hand where the muscles and tendons were cramping. As the muscles began to relax, Jared stepped closer and put his arm over Jensen’s shoulders and pulled him close. They

stood that way for a long moment, Jensen's breathing slowly coming under control as he leaned into the solid strength of the man beside him. The minutes passed and Jared made no move to pull away and Jensen let himself sink into the comfort.

"Would you take a picture for me?" Jared asked. At first the sounds weren't even words, just the warmth of his voice vibrating through his chest. "Please?"

"What?" Jensen replied without moving away.

"Take a picture."

"I don't understand."

"If I take a picture it will just be a snapshot. I know you will catch something I'm not seeing."

"I doubt it." Jensen laughed softly.

"Humor me, then we'll go have lunch," Jared said, handing Jensen his phone.

"Okay." Jensen accepted the phone and opened the camera. He looked at the mountain through the viewfinder, watching the light play on the clouds and the glaciers. The granite had a gray-blue color to it that was reflected in the sky in a way that seemed to be unique to mountains. It was impossible to explain without a picture. He took several shots, some with the full landscape and several zoomed in so the mountain filled the frame.

He was aware of Jared watching him as he took the photos, aware of the soft rise and fall of Jared's chest against his side. When he was finished, he turned. Jared was tall enough that Jensen had to look up into his face. The sun caught the highlighted in Jared's hair looking like burnished copper. Jensen felt the breath catch in his chest.

Jared reached up and put his hand on Jensen's cheek, his thumb gently stroking the line of Jensen's face. "Thank you," he said, the meaning more than just that somehow. He smiled, his thumb moved to brush over Jensen's lips.

A shiver ran through Jensen's body at that soft touch. The world narrowed to the two of them. He didn't know if they were actually alone on the summit or not, it didn't matter. Suddenly nothing mattered except that moment, that touch—until Jared leaned forward. Jensen met him halfway as their mouths came together in a kiss that ignited a fire in Jensen and the whole world became Jared's mouth, his body pressed tight against Jensen, the warmth of the sun on his head and the cool wind from the mountain.

Twenty-Four

Wednesday

It was quiet when they entered the restaurant. They were quickly seated at a table by the window, Mount Rainier seemingly close enough to be a third member of their party. Once they had ordered, Jared pulled out his phone, set it on the table and opened his gallery. He flipped through the pictures Jensen had taken of the mountain. Jensen looked with him. There were several photos he liked well enough to consider asking for a copy.

"This one." Jared had paused on one of the ones Jensen had taken while playing with the zoom feature on the phone. "I told you!"

"Told me what?" Jensen replied with a smile.

"That you would get a picture of something I wasn't even seeing."

"It's just a..."

“Oh no,” Jared raised his hand. “Don’t say it’s just a snapshot.”

“It is.”

“No, it’s not. Look at it.” He turned the device so Jensen could get a better look at the picture. What he saw first were Jared’s hands, the long elegant fingers, the palm in perfect proportion to the rest of the hand. He wanted to draw them, they were... “Hey.” Jared’s voice pulled him away from his thoughts.

“Sorry.” Jensen realized he’d tensed. He turned his attention to the picture.

“It’s like your paintings,” Jared said enthusiastically. “It’s a moment.” He made a vague gesture.

“It’s a photograph, they tend to capture moments.”

“That’s not what I mean and you know it.” He frowned. “It’s the totality of everything captured in a moment. It’s...” Jared paused, glancing out the window before looking back. “It’s everything about the place summed up in this perfectly, um, crystalized moment.”

Jensen nodded, swallowing against the sudden emotion as he realized Jared understood. “That’s the way it always was. I wanted to catch that sense of the fleeting,” he paused, “the moment. Things are always the same and always different. The exact light, the shadow, the clouds—even the plants are never the same from instant to instant and I tried to put that on canvas.”

“You succeeded. It’s one of the things I love about your paintings. I look at Mount Rainier every day, I have most of my life, and I have never seen it like you do.” He tapped the phone. “And that’s what you’ve done here. It’s the mountain complete in that moment, if that makes sense?”

“It makes sense,” Jensen agreed, “but I just took a photo.”

“If you say that one more time...” Jared left the threat hanging when the waiter appeared with their drinks, iced tea for Jared and soda water for Jensen. Jared stirred sugar in his tea, his smile daring Jensen to contradict him.

“Fine, I won’t.”

“Good, don’t,” Jared replied.

“Would you like wine with your meal?” the waiter asked as he set their appetizers on the table.

“I don’t,” Jared said quickly. “Jensen?”

“No, thanks.”

“Very good.” The waiter smiled a professional smile and left.

“They always seem offended when they say that,” Jared said with a laugh.

“You don’t drink, do you?” Jensen heard himself asking. It wasn’t what he’d been thinking about, but somehow the question fell out of his mouth.

“No, I don’t. When I was growing up, the media, doctors, teachers, it felt like everyone was really pushing the idea that alcoholism was genetic, both my parents were drunks, so I assumed I was doubly cursed.” He laughed. “I’ve been drunk twice in my life, and it was enough. Once was probably enough, actually.”

“I had a bad experience with alcohol when I was a kid,” Jensen said. “I don’t mean ‘bad’ bad, just more... When we were in our teens, Chris had some friend who bought a bottle of what they claimed was tequila. A word of advice, never drink tequila with hand-written labels, it’s really not fun the next day. It was so miserable, in fact, Jeff said he wouldn’t punish us, since we’d done that to ourselves.”

“Sounds fair.”

“Oh it was, trust me.” Jensen smiled, remembering the look on his father’s face.

“Can I get you anything?” the waiter was beside the table again.

“No, we’re fine,” Jared said.

“Very good.”

“Maybe we should eat before we drive him crazy.” Jared picked up his iced tea and held it up in a toast. They touched glasses and started to eat.

The food was good, and once he started, Jensen realized how hungry he was. The waitress at the diner they’d gone to as kids had always said hunger was the best sauce. As they finished their appetizer, the waiter brought the entrees. Jared seemed focused on eating, and they chatted while they ate, but nothing more than light conversation. They lingered over dessert until the restaurant was suddenly full with a loud group, moving tables around to make a single large table on the other side of the room.

“That’s our cue to leave,” Jared said with a laugh.

“I agree.” Jensen followed him out of the restaurant.

“Would you like to walk a bit? It’s still a couple of hours before the last ride down.”

“Sure.”

Jensen was completely distracted by the view of the mountain. They would walk for a minute or two, and he would slow, then stop, watching the light dance on the peak across from him. Jared waited patiently through several stops. He finally took Jensen’s hand in his, and when Jensen paused too long, he would gently tug at his hand until Jensen walked on.

They had been walking—and stopping—for about fifteen minutes, when they reached a bend in the trail. The path turned and snaked down the mountain at a much steeper grade than the part of the trail they were walking along. Just off the trail, there was a rock large enough to sit on and Jared led the way over and they sat down. Jared put his arm over Jensen’s shoulder and pulled him close.

The warm body he was resting against was almost as distracting as the view. Jensen put his right hand on Jared’s thigh as he looked across at Mount Rainier. “I love that mountain,” he said, suddenly needing to share this part of himself. “There were mountains where I grew up, but desert mountains are different. They are craggy and bare. They’re beautiful. Sometime so beautiful it took my breath away.”

“As the sun set?” Jared asked softly.

“That is amazing to see, but no, for me they were always most beautiful at the height of the sun. In fact, for me, the desert was most beautiful in the bright, hard, white light of a summer afternoon.”

“Why’s that?”

“The desert always feels more like itself in summer. It’s like that’s when it becomes its true self. I know most people think of it as ‘dead’ in the summer, but it’s not. There’s life everywhere you look, if you’re willing to see. I never thought anything could be that beautiful. When we left, we took our time getting here. We went to the Grand Tetons, and the Bitterroot Valley, and those mountains are pretty.” He shook his head as he struggled to get his words to match what he wanted to say.

“But?”

“But they didn’t strike me the same way as those craggy mountains and empty land I’d known. Nothing did. We came through Idaho and then across the plains of Eastern Washington. We stopped to have lunch at a rest stop about twenty miles west of Vantage. It was at the top of a

hill. I'll never forget it. I'd gone to the john and came out and I saw it for the first time. This snow-covered peak rising above the gold and black land. Once I saw it..."

"Yes?" Jared prompted after a few moments of quiet.

"It filled me up. It was so beautiful, so different than the land that was framing it at that moment. It played hide and seek with us as we got closer, there one minute, hidden in the landscape the next." Jensen smiled. "Then when we got into Western Washington it was raining."

"Of course it was."

"The mountain was completely gone. It still amazes me how it does that. Almost fifteen thousand feet of granite and ice and it can disappear."

"Matt claims it goes on vacation."

"I'd believe that." He chuckled. "Our first night in Western Washington, we stayed in Enumclaw. We'd ended up on Highway 164 from Auburn after stopping at a small diner for an early dinner. When we went to pull out of the parking lot, Jeff asked 'left or right?' and we chose right. It was still raining when we stopped, but the next morning the sun was out. We were on our way into Buckley when, suddenly, the mountain was there. Huge, blue and white against the sky. I couldn't take my eyes off of it. I was obsessed. I had to paint it."

Jensen stopped as his right hand started to tremble. He tried to will the reaction away, aware Jared had gone quiet beside him. There was a tension in the other man that hadn't been there before.

"Jensen," Jared said after several minutes of silence. He reached over with his free hand, lifted Jensen's right hand and pressed a gentle kiss into his scarred palm. "I... I want you to see a surgeon about your hands."

"I don't have enough saved," he replied.

"I want to pay for it."

"What?" Jensen barely managed to get the word out.

"I want to help."

"But it's a lot of mone..."

"All of it, Jensen, I want to pay for all of it." Jared met his eyes. "Before you say anything, I've been thinking about it for more than just a couple of days."

"Jared..."

"I need to tell you," Jared said softly, pain in his eyes.

"You can tell me anything."

"My family likes to make trouble," Jared began, looking uncomfortable. "I can't prove beyond a reasonable doubt, but they've destroyed things that mean something to me more than once." He turned and fixed his eyes on the mountain, tightening the hold on Jensen's hand as he did so. "I know it was a busy night, and there's no reason to remember, but I was there."

"There where?"

"That night, Jensen, at the gallery."

"You were..."

"I go to all the openings there. I've known Francis for years. When he said he was featuring you, there was no way I was going to miss it. I had to go. Matt was there too," he added. "I was waiting for a chance to talk to you when..."

"I don't understand."

"The family knew I collected your paintings. It's hard to miss when there are three at corporate." His breathing was harsh, his eyes bright with tears that were threatening to tumble

over his cheeks. “You need to know. I... I’m so sorry,” he looked down, the tears making bright tracks on his face.

“Sorry? It wasn’t your fault, it was just a random...” Jensen stopped when he saw the look in Jared’s eyes. It suddenly hit him. A huge wave that threatened to drown him. Jared’s comment about why the smoke bomb had been thrown in his home office. The insistent questions when Jensen told Jared about that night. His hand ached, his chest ached. “Jared?” he whispered, wanting a denial of his line of reasoning more than anything he’d wanted in his life.

“That’s just it, Jensen. I think it’s my fault.”

Twenty-Five

Wednesday

The sounds of humanity were completely removed from the place where they were. There were no car engines, no planes, nothing but the sounds of the birds, a chattering squirrel and the breeze. The wind seemed to carry the first hints of the scent of snow. It wasn’t cold, exactly, but it held that thing that was uniquely snow. It felt like the wind had taken Jensen’s voice as it slipped past them on its journey from the mountain. Jared’s confession had left him feeling bereft, confused and hurt. Was it betrayal? He wasn’t sure, but it was an ache that was every bit as excruciating as any he’d know.

“Then,” Jensen began, then stopped, not even sure what he wanted to say. Maybe it had been the only thing that could escape the maelstrom of thoughts racing through his head—and heart. He tried to take a breath past the pain and start again. “Then, is it all because of...” He stopped as he realized Jared’s flinched with each word, as if they were bullets tearing into his body.

“Because of?” Jared whispered and pulled away, dropping his head in his hands. He took a shuddering breath. “Until Matt saw you at Heavy Horses, I thought you were dead. Everyone did. Yes, I changed my offer on the land because of you, but not because of *this*. I wish I could just sign over the land, but I can’t, that’s another thing the family has its fucking hands in.” He laughed bitterly. “And I’m not falling in love with you because of guilt, if that’s what you’re thinking. And that’s not why I want you to see a surgeon. I... Matt was right, I should have told you a long time ago.”

“Matt?” Jensen couldn’t help asking, even as he struggled with everything. “The day you argued, when you told me about the paintings,” he said with sudden clarity.

“It wasn’t the paintings, exactly, or only that. He knows...He...” Jared shook his head. “He said it was only fair if I let you know I was there—and the rest of it.” He mumbled the last, the suddenly stood.

Jared walked to where the world fell away, dropping hundreds of feet into the valley. As he stood there, he seemed to fold in on himself to the point he looked half his actual size. That hurt Jensen more than almost anything else, which came a surprise. In the midst of his own pain, all he could focus on was the other man, hunched over, his head turned down as if he were contemplating the drop. As that thought wormed its way into his consciousness, Jensen stood, other things crowding in as well, including Matt’s admission that Jared had collapsed eight months before. With that thought came Jensen’s own rush of guilt. Jared thought Jensen been killed in that dark alley, and he’d carried the weight of a sense of fault. That trickled through his

mind when something stopped him completely. His breath caught in his throat as he realized what Jared had just said. “What did you say?”

“I’m so sorry,” Jared said again, and took another step towards the edge.

Jensen walked to where he was standing. It was closer to the edge than he’d thought, he fought a moment of vertigo, reflexively grabbing Jared’s arm before tugging on it, to get the other man to face him. The sense of Jared being smaller was underscored when Jensen realized his eyes were almost on the same level as the other man. “What did you say?”

“I should have told you sooner.” He let his head drop further so Jensen was now looking into his hair.

“Before that.”

“I want you to see a surgeon.”

“Before that.”

“I’m sorry I can’t just give you the land.”

Jensen reached out cupped Jared’s chin, gently lifting his face until he could meet his eyes. “After that.”

“What?” Jared looked confused for a moment, then huffed out a breath, a soft smile lighting his face as something flickered to life in his eyes. “I’m falling in love with you.”

The look warmed Jensen, the ache in his chest changing to something else, something related to that intense gaze. “You are?”

“I am. And it’s not because of your art, it’s in spite of it, if that even makes sense. It’s you, since that first night, it was you I wanted to see, you I wanted to talk to, you I wanted to…” He huffed softly. “It was you.”

“Jared,” Jensen heard himself saying, not exactly sure what he intended to say.

“It’s a lot,” Jared said softly. “I don’t think I even realized it until I said it—or until you made me think about what I said. Occasionally, my mouth gets ahead of my brain.”

“I find that hard to believe.” Jensen felt a smile tugging at the edge of his mouth. It was endearingly out of character for the ruthless businessman, known for few words and decisive action.

“Usually I cover the impulse by biting someone’s head off.” He swallowed. “We have a lot to talk about.”

“We do, but… I…”

“You?” Jared looked unsure, his eyes bright, begging Jensen to understand, to be willing to take a chance.

“Yes.”

A smile slowly warmed Jared’s face. He bent forward and this time when their lips met it felt like an electric charge ran through Jensen’s body. There were a lot of questions still to be answered, but Jensen realized he was willing to take the chance. He returned the kiss as he lost himself in Jared’s touch for the second time that day.

Twenty-Six

Thursday

The scent of coffee wafted out of the café as Jensen climbed down from Jared’s truck. He was in an odd frame of mind this morning. The emotions of the day before warmed him, and had

led to a very comfortable evening. They'd managed to catch the last gondola off the mountain, and then had a quiet drive to the house. Neither one of them had been ready for the day to end, so Jared had ordered pizza and they'd spent the evening watching a game, trading caresses and just spending time in a soft glow.

At nine-thirty, Jensen's phone had buzzed with a text from Jeff "*Family meeting tomorrow morning at eight. Be there or we come get you.*" It was oddly curt and when Jensen texted back, his father had insisted that they would talk in the morning. Jared muttered something about Matt, and the evening had abruptly ended. That had actually worked out well, in the end, because he knew they were both considering taking it further and Jeff's text had been a reminder that there was more going on than just the two of them.

Jared's phone rang as he was getting out of the truck at the café. He answered it and waved to Jensen to go ahead of him. Quinn was chatting with a customer and glanced up as Jensen entered. "I'll be right with you," he said with a smile. "Would you like your usual?"

"Sure," Jensen replied, looking at his brother with a frown.

"Have a nice day," Quinn said as his customer left, then turned to Jensen. "Do you want a sixteen or a twenty ounce?"

"What do you recommend?"

"Twenty, maybe an extra shot or two." Quinn grabbed a cup and started the coffee.

"Uh oh." Jensen walked over to lean on the counter while Quinn was busy.

"I'll plan on Jared having a twenty as well." He was keeping his eyes turned away as he worked.

"Quinn?" Jensen asked, wondering what they'd be facing.

"Oh, hey, Jared, you want a twenty this morning?" Quinn asked brightly, ignoring Jensen's question.

"Twenty?" Jared raised his eyebrows and glanced at Jensen with a *What's up?* look. Jensen shrugged.

"Yep, it's a twenty-ounce kind of morning," Quinn agreed amiably.

"What's going on?" Jensen asked as Quinn handed him his coffee with an overly bright smile.

"We're all going to chat about it, you two go on in, I'll be there in a minute."

"Quinn?"

"Just go, okay?" Quinn snapped, then pasted his smile back on as someone walked through the door. He handed Jared his cup and made a shooing gesture towards the dining room.

Jensen took a deep breath and walked into the main room of the café. Jeff and Matt were sitting at one of the tables and he could hear the clank of dishes from the kitchen.

"They're here!" Jeff called as they approached the table.

"You look weird," Jared said, sitting down next to Matt.

"Weird?" the lawyer scoffed.

"Yeah, I'd say it was guilt, but you're immune to it."

"Yep, that's me, immune." Matt looked at Jeff then at the table.

"Jeff." Jensen didn't even bother to make it a question.

"We had a little chat yesterday." Jeff nodded at Matt.

After frowning at his father for a moment, Jensen turned to the lawyer. "Are you okay? I've had little chats before."

"I'll live," Matt said with a crooked smile.

“He will, other people might not be so lucky,” Chris said, coming into the room, drying his hands on a dishtowel.

“He means will not might. Other people *will* not be so lucky.” Quinn dropped into one of the chairs.

“What?” Jared asked, looking at everyone in turn.

“Let’s get settled, everyone good for coffee? Food?” Jeff asked.

“Yes, sir,” they all said more or less at the same time.

“Good. Shall we get down to business?” Jeff waited for a moment, then went on. “Matt had a chance to get some stuff off his chest yesterday while we were in the garden. After chatting for a while, I thought it was prudent to bring Chris and Quinn in for the rest of the conversation.”

“What did you say?” Jared fixed a glare on the lawyer.

“I told them exactly what you think I told them,” Matt snapped. “You know damn well I’ve wanted to since I brought the stuff for the espresso stand.”

“It wasn’t your...” Jared stood, thunder gathering on his face.

“Sit down, son,” Jeff said in the quiet voice that was, as far as Jensen was concerned, more terrifying than any angry shout. Apparently, Jared thought so too, he dropped back into his chair with a *thump*.

“Sorry,” Jared muttered, then picked up his coffee.

“He was right to tell me—us,” Jeff continued. “We have a rule, family deals with all shit together.”

“And this is some major shit,” Quinn added.

“Family?” Jared repeated softly, an odd expression on his face.

“Yes, family.” Matt smiled like he couldn’t quite believe it. “And in no uncertain terms,” he added, nodding at Jeff.

“That’s right,” Jeff agreed, Chris and Quinn nodding as well.

“I talked with Jensen yesterday,” Jared said to Matt. “I was planning on asking you if we should talk to every... the rest of the family.” He finished after a pause.

“Good.” The lawyer nodded.

“Jensen?” Jeff met his eyes.

“We talked about that night.” He felt Jared tense beside him. He slipped his hand off the table and took Jared’s in his.

“Matt told us too, and I’ve told him we absolutely don’t believe it has anything to do with Jared. There is no fault here.” Jeff held up a hand to forestall anyone speaking. “He also told us about Collins, the family and why you can’t deed the property over to us without some kind of ‘payment’ on record. Then, when we were talking about it, we discovered something that’s a little unsettling.”

“Collins was here,” Matt said quietly. “At least we’re pretty sure it was him.”

“What?” Jared demanded.

“There was a creepy guy here, Millie refused to serve him after he tried to convince her to go outside with him a couple of times. I went in to handle it, and was a little surprised when he tried to get *me* to go outside with him too. He got pushy about it and I asked him to leave,” Quinn said with a growl. “Then I caught the little shit in the back garden taking pictures! I, ahem, removed him from the property and told him if he showed up here again, we’d call the cops.”

“How do you know it was him?” Jared’s hand was trembling in his.

“Description matches,” Matt said. “We’re pretty sure.”

“What did he want?” Jared turned to Quinn.

“He said he had something for me to see, then asked me to meet outside.” Quinn shuddered. “It was enough to creep *me* out. Millie wouldn’t even come back in the dining room until he was gone.”

“That doesn’t really answer the question.”

“No, it doesn’t,” Jeff agreed. “But I dropped a word in Walt’s ear yesterday, giving him the description and letting him know he’d been an issue for Millie. We can all keep an eye out for him, and from what Matt told me, if we can catch in the right spot, as it were, it might help everything else.” He looked at Jared. “I need to ask you, son, and I need an honest answer. Why didn’t you tell us you knew who Jensen was? And that you were there the night of the attack?”

“Jeff, you said...” Matt began then stopped when Jeff turned on him.

“I’m pretty sure Matt already told you,” Jensen jumped to Jared’s defense.

“I need it from him, Jensen, the rules apply. Especially now,” Jeff said firmly.

“Why now?” Jensen tried to sound innocent.

“If you think I’ve suddenly gone blind and stupid, you need to rethink that.” Jeff was frowning at him.

“That goes for all of us, by the way,” Chris said. “Even if I couldn’t see your hands under the table, it’s written all over the two of you.”

“I should have told you, I’m sorry I didn’t. I...” Jared’s shoulders hunched. “It was my fault, and I...”

“It’s not your fault, Jared,” Jeff said gently. “I already told you we don’t believe that.”

“But...”

“Even if, and that’s a big if, we find out that somehow your family was involved, it is still not your fault.” Jeff’s voice was firm. “You have no control over people like that, and you have to stop accepting fault for their misdeeds.”

“I wasn’t sure how to tell you once everything got going.” Jared answered.

That set the family off. They were all talking at once.

“You should know, I want Jensen to see a surgeon,” Jared’s quiet statement stopped the conversation in its tracks. “I’ll pay for everything.”

“What?” Jeff finally asked after a few minutes of shocked silence.

“I am so glad I didn’t get that far yesterday,” Matt said wryly.

“You knew?” Chris snapped.

“Yes,” the lawyer replied calmly.

“And you didn’t tell us why?” Chris’s voice vibrated with anger.

“Jared needed to tell Jensen first, I think that’s fair, don’t you?” Matt seemed completely unperturbed by Chris and Quinn glowering at him.

“He’s right, boys, stand down.” Jeff fixed them with a stern look.

“I was planning on calling you and telling you today,” Jared said, looking at Quinn.

“Me? Why?”

“I wanted you to help convince him.”

Quinn looked at Jared, his eyebrows climbing. “Wait, you mean he... refused?” He turned to Jensen. “You refused?”

“I didn’t say yes,” Jensen answered cautiously.

“Why?” Jared asked. The question had stood between them all night, the elephant in the room neither one of them had been willing to acknowledge.

“Jensen?” Jeff’s eyes were filled with concern.

“I...I’ve tried to tell all of you,” Jensen said, trying not to let the pain creep into his voice. “What happens if?” He left the question hanging.

“If?” Matt looked at Jeff.

“Nothing can be done,” Jeff said softly.

“Isn’t it better to know?” Matt asked, looking from Jeff to Jensen.

“It’s too much money!” Jensen snapped, desperation getting a firm hold of him. “I can’t let him pay for it just because he feels guilty!” It was the wrong thing to say and he knew it, even as the words were slipping out of his mouth. Jared froze, Jeff leveled *that* frown on him and his brothers started objecting on Jared’s behalf. “Sorry,” Jensen said contritely. “I don’t think that.” Jared squeezed his hand.

“Why don’t you see the doctor, then we can talk about it?” Matt said reasonably.

“I...” Jensen shook his head. “What about the tests? There will be tests.”

“Then after the tests,” Matt’s voice was insistent and Jensen suddenly saw the lawyer in him.

“It’s something we can’t do for you yet, or maybe ever realistically.” Chris dropped his hand on Jensen’s arm. “We’ve been talking about it, but we’re not sure we could swing it, even with the savings. You should do this, Jensen. I know—God, I know—what it can be like to face things.”

“He’s right,” Quinn picked up when Chris faltered. “You should know, even...” he trailed off.

“I agree, son,” Jeff’s voice was gruff. “See the doctor, then we can make the next decision as a family.”

It was quiet for a long moment. Jensen trying to stop his breathing from becoming harsh as he faced the thing he hadn’t wanted to ever face. Surgery would be painful, therapy after would be worse. The fear of another mistake like the infection and antibiotic loomed over him like a creature from Hell. And all of that paled when he thought about the other side—what if it was true and the hope he’d been hanging on to was... He looked around the table at his family, thinking what they’d all faced over the years. He met Jared’s eyes, seeing the warmth, the concern and that spark of something else there. Jensen took a deep breath, it felt like he was teetering on the edge of a cliff where they’d been the day before. There was the terrifying drop to the bottom but there was also the mountain, standing above it.

“Okay,” Jensen said slowly. “I’ll see the doctor.”

Twenty-Seven

Thursday

The sun was warm overhead as Jensen walked through the flowerbeds. It was nearing noon and they would need to start harvesting for dinner in a little while, but for now he was alone in the gardens. He suspected that was partly because the family knew he needed time to think, and partly because they were still “discussing” things. It was all happening faster than he ever thought it could. As soon as he’d said yes, Jared was on the phone and in less than half an hour had arranged an appointment for Monday—next week. As soon as Jared had relayed that information, the family had started up again—questions about the surgeon, the offices and everything else they could think to ask.

Jensen needed quiet, so he’d slipped outside.

The dahlias were in full bloom and a riot of color. When he'd planted them, he'd purposefully mixed the colors so instead of having orderly rows of yellow, magenta, red, lavender and orange, colors and varieties were mixed together. Since he was the only one who cut them for the most part, he planted not for ease of harvest, but for enjoyment. His family teased him about it, but more than once he'd come out to discover one of them sitting amongst the blooms.

"Hey," Chris said from behind him. Jensen hadn't heard him approaching, but that was nothing new. Chris could move silently, even now.

"Hey," Jensen replied without turning.

"Want to tell me what you're thinking about?"

Jensen snorted and shook his head. He had no idea where to begin, or even what he wanted to say. He was quiet as he watched the horses play behind the barn.

"It's hard for people to understand, Jensen," Chris said softly. "It's hard for people to get how big it is—starting over. Beginnings can be terrifying."

"Chris?" Jensen turned to face his brother. Chris looked sad.

"When I woke up... after..." He swallowed. "My first question was about Quinn. I had to know if he'd made it. It took longer for the rest of reality to sink in. I'm not even sure how much time passed between asking about Quinn and the rest. It took longer than you'd think. Then, when I realized my left foot was gone, I figured life as I'd known it was over. Sure, I could come home, but what was left? The life I'd been planning on was gone."

"I... You've never really..."

"No, I haven't. It's not easy to put into words. But, you know, it was harder to face the fact life *was* going on, that I might be able to have something like *normal* again that seemed to fuck me up. I was in PT, doing fine with the crutches, but looking at the possibility of a prosthesis for the first time was hard. It wasn't the work that it would take, it was the *beginning*." Chris made a vague gesture. "It was then the what ifs really caught up and started pursuing me. Like the nightmares weren't enough, now they were full of what ifs too."

"Chris..."

"Remember when we were kids? We were surviving okay in foster families. It was what we knew, it was not really safe, but it was what we'd become accustomed to. When Jeff adopted us, we had a few rough months."

"We were scared," Jensen said, remembering late night conversations. "What if it all ended and we had to go back to our foster families?"

"It's a lot like that, beginnings are always like that. And the pain, the fear, is impossible to explain to anyone but someone who's faced something similar." Chris smiled, a little wanly, but it was a smile. "Look at us now. Quinn even laughs every day. Think about that one, Jensen. Quinn laughs every damn day."

"Yeah," Jensen agreed softly, tears in his eyes, thinking about those dark days when Quinn barely spoke, let alone smiled.

"And never forget, we're not in any of this alone." He pulled Jensen into a hug. "Hell, the family just got bigger. Who'd have thought that would happen?"

"I know." Jensen was still unsure.

"Never thought you'd be the one to score a millionaire. My charm must be slipping." Chris laughed softly.

"Mine too, right?" Quinn said suddenly.

"You fucker, been listening long?" Chris let Jensen go and turned on their brother.

“Long enough to second everything you’ve said.” He grinned. “Especially about the charm.”

Jensen grinned back, then joined in their laughter.

Friday

The sun was rising in a cloudless blue sky as Jensen walked up the stairs to the house. He hadn’t slept well, and had given up sometime before dawn. He settled in his chair in the living room and hoped he could read and maybe doze over his book. Unfortunately, every time his eyes would drift close, everything would crowd in, and drive sleep away. Finally, around six, he’d made a cup of coffee. Ten minutes after the coffee was finished, Jared texted to head up to the house and they could share breakfast.

Jensen tapped on the door, then stepped into the kitchen. The room already smelled like fresh coffee, but Jared was at the machine, dropping another pod in the maker. He was tapping his finger impatiently on the countertop as he waited for it to start dripping.

“Good morning,” Jensen said.

Jared turned and walked over, pulling Jensen into a hug, then leaning in for a long, slow kiss. “Good morning.” He smiled, then pulled away when the coffeemaker gurgled to a stop. “You need one?” Without waiting for an answer, he put a cup under the spout and dropped another pod into the machine.

“Usually.” Jensen smiled and opened the fridge, taking out the milk and setting it on the island. “Would you like me to make breakfast?” he asked as he grabbed potatoes, onions, eggs and cheese.

“You don’t have to cook.” Jared was frowning.

“I don’t mind. I like to, I don’t get much chance at home. Chris is a little territorial about his kitchens.”

“Like hummingbirds and feeders?” Jared laughed. He’d helped Quinn fill the feeders at the farm and had been attacked by two of the more aggressive hummingbirds.

“Something like that.” Jensen grabbed a knife from the block. Jared’s kitchen was very well appointed, even though, as far as he could tell, Jared rarely cooked. “I’m not a great chef, but I can manage comfort food pretty well.” He started cubing the potatoes. Chris and Quinn had made sure he had everything to make breakfast as he’d left the day before. They’d sent a variety of potatoes, so he had blue, red and gold varieties going into the pan.

“Colorful,” Jared said from right behind him, leaning his chin on Jensen’s shoulder as he put the potatoes in and started slicing the onion. It was hard to focus on what he was doing with the warmth of Jared’s body all along his back and his hair brushing the exposed skin on Jensen’s neck.

“They all taste a little different too.” Jensen dropped the onions in the pan and gave them a toss, the way Chris had shown him, but which usually resulted in food on the floor whenever Jensen tried it. For a change it worked exactly right and Jared pressed a kiss into his neck. Cooking with Jared in the room was proving to be harder than he’d anticipated.

“It’s weird, the onions aren’t making me cry.”

“They’re Walla Walla sweets. Last year, Quinn was over in Eastern Washington and somehow made a deal with a farmer and consequently, we get a delivery of onions every time they come over the mountains for the farmers’ market.”

“What kind of deal did he make?” Jared asked, still leaning against Jensen.

“We have no idea. Chris says sometimes it’s better not to know. Do you have a cheese grater?”

“I do. Want me to do it?” He put a cheese grater on the counter and reached for the cheese. “I’m pretty brilliant at grating cheese.”

“Good, I’m a disaster at it, and no, it has nothing to do with my hands.” Jensen smiled. “At least, not the injury.” He held his hands, knuckles up, for Jared to see. “I’ve grated off every single knuckle. They won’t let me grate cheese anymore.”

“I can see why.” Jared chuckled. “Would you like me to make toast?”

“Sure, Chris sent a couple loaves of bread.”

“Part of one of them might have been consumed about three.” Jared reached around Jensen and pulled a bread knife from the block. “Don’t tell Chris, I tossed it into the microwave to warm it up a bit.”

“You put bread in the microwave?”

“I did.” Jared sliced several pieces and dropped them in the toaster. “When I was a kid, before I went away to school, we had one housekeeper. She wasn’t a cook, mother had someone for that, but she worried about me, said I was too skinny. So she would make me bread warmed in the microwave with butter and jam.” He shrugged. “It’s kind of comfort food.”

“Funny how things like that can taste better than anything.” Jensen nudged him with his shoulder. “Chris would swipe peanut butter and honey from his foster family and we would mix them together and sneak into the movie theater on Saturdays. We still have it—on bread—while we watch TV or something.”

“I’ll have to try it.”

“On microwaved bread?”

“It could be good. Is this enough cheese?”

“More than enough. We’ll have some for lunch too.”

“Thinking of lunch,” Jared said casually. “The meeting I had this afternoon was moved to next week.”

“It was?” Jensen scrambled the eggs and poured them on top of the potatoes and onions, then added a generous handful of cheese.

“I thought maybe we could take the day off again. Take a drive, maybe out towards the ocean or something?” He sounded endearingly unsure.

“I don’t know. My boss is expecting the gardens to get finished and the stable to get cleaned.” Jensen dished the egg mixture onto plates and added extra cheese.

“True.” Jared set the plates on the island, then pulled Jensen against him. “I heard he can be a bit of a hard-ass.”

Jensen smiled up to him. “I’ve heard that too, but I think I can skip today.”

“Good.”

“I know someplace to go, it’s east of the mountains.”

“Really?” Jared brushed his hand over his cheek.

“Yeah, it’s only a couple of hours if we take I-90.”

“Where are we going?”

“It’s a surprise?” Jensen said.

“As long as you point me in the right direction, I’m game.” Jared bent and took his mouth in a long and breathless kiss. “Let’s eat, then take off. Before that boss of yours gets caught at the office.”

The forest was thinning, the fir and cedar of the western side of the Cascades being replaced by the pine that inhabited the east side. It always reminded Jensen of the high plains of New Mexico and Arizona. As they traveled further east, dark volcanic outcrops against the golden grass started to dominate the landscape. It was still early as they drove past the signs for Cle Elum and up a long hill. Jared stopped at a rest stop near the summit of the hill, claiming it was bad luck to drive further without stopping.

When they were back on the road, Jensen kept a lookout for their exit. It usually came up faster than expected and Quinn tended to drive past and they would have to go all the way into Thorp to turn around and come back. Chris accused their brother, every time, of purposefully missing the turn so they could go to the Thorp antique mall and farm stand.

“That’s it,” Jensen said, pointing at the Elk Heights Road exit.

“Here? There’s nothing here.”

“Trust me.”

“Of course.” Jared turned on the blinker and pulled off the freeway onto the small, two lane road.

“Follow it around, we have to cross over the freeway again.”

“Okay.” There was quiet for a moment, just the sound of the engine and the road under the tires. “I was wondering, um, I know it’s a little late notice, but I have a function to go to tomorrow, would you like to go?”

“Function?” Jensen glanced over at him.

“It’s a fundraiser for the symphony. I’m a regular donor. I don’t go that often, but I thought this program might be good. They’re doing two cello concertos and Bach’s first cello sonata.”

“Tomorrow? The one with Aubrey Stephens?”

“That’s the one.”

“I’d love to go, but you should ask Jeff. He loves the cello and is a huge fan of Stephens,” Jensen said. “We wanted to get him tickets, but it’s a little pricey because it’s a fundraiser.”

“I have a box, there’s room for the whole family.”

“Chris and Quinn probably wouldn’t go even if they didn’t have dinner service, but Millie is working tomorrow, so Jeff could go.”

“Awesome. I’ll text Matt when we stop.” Jared paused. “Are we going in the right direction?”

“We are, it’s up this valley.”

“Okay, but if we get eaten by a bear it’s your fault.”

“That’s not as funny as you think.” Jensen laughed at the look Jared gave him. “The pavement ends around that next curve. We’re almost there.”

“There’s nothing here.”

“There is. Pull over at that wide spot.” Jensen pointed across the road.

Dust mingled with the scents of cottonwood and sage as they got out of the truck. Jensen took a deep breath, enjoying the silence of the place. From where they were parked, he could just make out the musical sound of Taneum Creek as it flowed towards the Columbia River. A hawk called from overhead and from closer by a songbird sang from the top of a pine to their left.

“What are those?” Jared asked, breaking the silence, pointing at a tree covered with dark red fruit.

“Chokecherries.”

“Are they edible?” Jared picked one and sniffed it.

“Yes, they are, but...” Before Jensen could finish, Jared popped it into his mouth, then made a face. “They’re *very* bitter,” Jensen added with a grin.

“They are.”

“Chris makes jam from them. Elderberries too, last year he didn’t have enough of either for a second batch so he mixed them.” Jensen led the way past a concrete block and down a rutted and heavily washed road. “It didn’t gel quite right, so it’s closer to syrup, but it’s awesome on pancake and waffles.”

“I have a waffle maker. Matt bought it as a house warming gift.”

“Matt bought it?” Jensen had a hard time believing that.

“He thinks it’s funny. It makes waffles and omelets and probably can fly the space shuttle. So far it’s been handy to prop things open because it weighs a ton.”

“I’ll ask Chris for his no-fail recipe and we can try it out.”

“I like the sound of that.” Jared caught his hand and held it as they walked.

The road wound through long, golden grass that looked like flowing water when the breeze moved through it. Tall mullein plants with gray-green fuzzy leaves and yellow flower stalks, some taller than Jared, grew along the gravel. The elderberry bushes were heavy with berries and on the other side of the elderberry there was a tree, gnarled with age and full of...

“Those look like apples,” Jared said and cut through the grass towards the tree. “These are apples! Are those pears?”

“They are,” Jensen answered, catching up with him as Jared was making a beeline through the trees.

“And more apples!” He picked one and took a bite. “Good apples.”

“It’s an old homestead. There are several varieties of apples and pears on this side of the road, and over there,” he pointed to a group of trees clustered beneath a stand of aspen. “Are plums.”

“Plums?”

“Black ones and green gage.”

“Like prune plums?” Jared had stopped under an apple tree.

“Exactly.”

“Apples can wait, let’s go get plums.” He headed away from the apples, across the road and was wading into the long grass a moment later. “Hey, there’s a path back here.”

“Remember those bears you mentioned?” Jensen said as he followed.

“Yeah?” Jared had stopped and turned back towards him, eyebrows raised.

“They like plums a lot.” Jensen reached him and glanced into the small grove of fruit trees. “But they usually aren’t here at this time of day. They like to stop by in the evening, or so we discovered.”

“Oh good, I’d hate to have to wrestle a bear for my plums. I love prune plums. Matt’s grandparents had a couple trees. We took turns climbing them, the ones at the top are the best.” He pulled a plum off one of the trees and took a bite, a happy smile on his face, and a little juice running over his chin. “Better than I remember!”

“You should try the green gage ones.”

“Mmmm, in a minute,” he said, picking another and biting into it with a blissful look on his face.

Jensen chuckled and walked past him towards the other trees. He was fighting the most unreasonable flash of emotion. It wasn’t really jealousy, because he wasn’t jealous of a piece of

fruit, it was more a longing to be the one to be responsible for that happy look on the other man's face. Which was stupid. He shook his head and pulled one of the brightly colored green gage plums off a tree. He'd never had them before they'd discovered this place, and he wasn't sure they'd taste as good anywhere else. It was more than just the unusual sweet-tart flavor, it was the scent of the aspen and cottonwoods and the long grass that added to the overall sensation.

"How did you find this place?" Jared asked, coming up beside him.

"We went to the fruit stand right by the exit and Chris asked if there was any place to get elderberries, he'd seen a lot from the road, but no place to stop. The guy at the stand sent us up this way. There are a lot in the valley. We were driving up the road looking for someplace to stop—we'd seen several logging trucks and wanted to make sure we were well off the road. It was pure chance we pulled off there. You should have heard Quinn when he discovered the apples." Jensen grinned at the memory.

"It's amazing."

"If we follow that path," Jensen pointed where there was a break in the bushes at the far side of the grove. "It leads to a little clearing right on the creek. We usually have lunch down there when we come over to get fruit. In fact, we're planning to come over in a week. You should come."

"I'll make Matt come too, he needs to get out of the city more. If he's in town he works, and he needs to take a break now and then."

"Maybe he can get rosehip gathering detail," Jensen said with a grimace. "Don't get me wrong, they're worth it in the end. Chris makes this amazing jelly and syrup, but the thorns are worse than barbed wire."

"Sounds like fun." Jared laughed softly, smiling down at him in a way that made a rush of warmth run through Jensen's body. Jared stepped closer and leaned in for a kiss. His mouth tasted like plums and apples. Jensen returned it, pressing his body against Jared's as the kiss became passionate. A logging truck rattled by on the road, its horn abruptly shattering the silence. Jared broke the kiss, but didn't pull away. "Let's get some fruit and go to the stream for a bit, then we can head home before the traffic gets bad."

"Sounds like a plan," Jensen said, loath to step away.

"Mm hmm," Jared said, before he bent to kiss him again.

Twenty-Eight

Saturday

A light drizzle had started overnight. The first hints of it had appeared as they drove home from Eastern Washington. As they started to drop down Snoqualmie Pass clouds were drifting between the trees and the warm air coming in the windows had the scent of moisture that preceded rain in the early fall. The wet air increased the tangy scent of the autumn forest. It was a smell that seemed unique to this part of the world. It was a combination of fir and deciduous trees, of fallen leaves and berries. When he was still able to paint, it was something he'd tried to express on canvas, and had never been happy with the result. The many scents of the Northwest in general and the plateau specifically had become the solid backdrop of life. The cottonwoods were the most important part of the mix, and there was something special about the first day in spring when their scent would fill the plateau again.

Jensen smiled as he opened the door from his apartment into the main house. The windows in the kitchen were open and it was filled with the scent of the cottonwoods and coffee. Jared wasn't in the room, but Jensen could hear his voice coming from the office. He glanced at the clock, it was getting close to noon. They'd been interrupted at breakfast by a phone call, and Jared had disappeared into his office. Jensen had gone out to the stable for a couple hours. He hadn't really worked hard—or worked at all, for that matter. He'd spent most of the morning planning the greenhouse. Jared still hadn't given the final okay for that project, but Jensen was pretty sure that was the plan.

He stopped by the refrigerator and grabbed a bottle of sparkling water for himself and one for Jared, then headed back to the office. Jensen paused in the door until Jared looked up and waved him in. He set one of the bottles of water in front of Jared, then dropped into the chair in by the desk.

“What part of that is hard to understand?” Jared said with a growl. “I'll expect that report first thing Monday. If it's not in my inbox by six, don't bother going to work.” He tossed the phone on his desk. “Some days.” He shook his head. “But where would I put all the bodies?”

“Well, we talked about taking out that stump, that will leave a pretty good sized hole,” Jensen laughed.

“I might take you up on that,” he said, opening his bottle of water, taking a sip and frowning at the back wall.

“Quinn called and wanted to know when we were going to come over. His ability to keep secrets is not as well developed as you might hope.” In fact, his brother had called three times already. They'd decided to tell Jeff about the concert today, as a surprise, and Quinn was getting impatient.

“I am so done,” Jared said, standing. “Let's get out of here.”

They were pulling up at the farm less than fifteen minutes later. Jared parked beside Jeff's truck and they walked through the house to the kitchen.

“There you are. I was wondering when you'd get here. Chris is on a rampage and wants everything harvested early tonight for some reason,” Jeff said by way of greeting.

“It's not a rampage,” Chris replied from where he was standing at the stove.

“Seems kind of rampage-y to me.” Quinn's voice was teasing.

“No one asked you.” Chris tossed his towel towards Quinn.

“See, that's the problem, no one ever asks me.”

“There's a reason for that,” Chris said, carrying a pan to the table.

“Want to tell me what's going on?” Jeff asked as Chris sat down. He looked around the table. “Because something is.”

“Why do you say that?” Jensen sat down beside Matt and Jared sat next to him.

“Because everyone is acting very innocent.” Jeff frowned. “What's going on?” he demanded, sounding less like he was amused and more like he was worried something had gone wrong.

“It's nothing bad,” Matt assured him. “Why don't you tell him, Jensen.”

“It's really Jared...” Jensen began.

“Someone say something,” Jeff growled.

“It was Jensen who mentioned...” Jared looked nervous.

“You get awkward at the weirdest moments.” Matt shook his head. “You're going with us tonight,” he said, frowning at everyone.

“Where?” Jeff focused on the lawyer.

“Where? Seattle.”

“Seattle, why would I go to Seattle tonight?” He stopped and met Jensen’s eyes. “Well?”

“Aubrey Stephens. Jared has a box and invited us to go,” Jensen replied.

Jeff stared at him for a moment, emotion filling his eyes. “He... You...” He turned to Jared.

“We wanted to get you tickets, Jeff, but it was a little out of reach,” Chris said.

“I don’t know what to say,” Jeff said softly. “Thank you.” He swallowed hard. “I...”

“Don’t mention it,” Jared said, looking a little embarrassed.

“I will mention it. Thank you.” Jeff repeated, his eyes suspiciously bright. “It means... a great deal.”

It was silent for a long moment before Quinn cleared his throat. “Let’s eat so we can get to work,” he said gruffly.

Traffic was heavy as they reached Seattle. There was a Mariners game and the flow of cars had stalled to barely a crawl around the city. Jared was in the carpool lane, which was moving faster than the rest of the freeway, but it was a little terrifying as well. People stuck in the lanes that weren’t moving occasionally dodged into the HOV lane and once or twice it had been a near miss. It didn’t seem to bother Jared as he would avoid what Jensen was sure was going to be a major collision. Matt, on the other hand, kept up a running commentary on everyone’s driving ability. Every now and then, Jeff would add a comment, but for the most part, his father had been quiet since they climbed into Jared’s truck to head north.

When they reached the turn to Benaroya Hall, Jared deftly swung around a long line of cars waiting to get into the parking garages around the hall. He pulled into a lane marked “valet only” and drove around the building, stopping just before the driveway into the parking under the Hall. Attendants raced to open their doors, they climbed out and headed up the hill towards the entrance.

Jensen dropped back beside his father. “Are you okay?”

“Yes,” Jeff said immediately. “You? It’s been awhile since we put on suits.”

“I’m fine,” Jensen replied, then realized what his father was really asking. They were less than four blocks from where the attack happened. He took a deep breath, trying to control the sudden reaction.

“Hey.” Jared had stopped and was waiting for them. “Everything alright?”

“Yes,” Jensen assured him with a smile.

“You sure?” Jared’s voice was concerned. “I just realized...”

“I’m sure. I promise,” he added when Jared still looked unsure.

Jared nodded and they headed the rest of the way up the hill and into Benaroya. It was busy, people waiting at the ticket windows and a crowd milling around the symphony gift shop. They wound their way through the crowd towards the lobby. Jared paused at the door to hand their tickets to an usher in a dark green jacket and then led the way into the lobby. The room was full of men in dark suits and women in cocktail dresses and evening gowns. Servers circled through the crowd with trays of appetizers and flutes of champagne. One of them made a beeline for Jared, a smile lighting his face.

“Mr. Padalecki! I was hoping you’d be here tonight!”

“Andy, it’s good to see you,” Jared said, smiling at the him.

“Would you and Mr. Cohen like your usual?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“And you?” he turned to Jensen and Jeff.

“Coffee, please, milk and sugar,” Jensen answered for both of them. Jeff was back to being quiet, a smile lighting his face.

“I’ll be right back!”

“You should give him a job,” Matt said, watching the server head to get them their drinks.

“You’re right, I should.” Jared nodded. “He’s remembered us since the first time he served us. He works here every event, so that’s something.”

“It’s partially because you’re tall enough he can spot you in any crowd.” Matt laughed.

“Or because you always wear that tie.” Jared shot back.

“I like this tie,” Matt said with a grin. “You gave it to me.”

“As a joke.”

“I thought it was a diversion to draw attention away from your eye,” Jeff said with a grin.

“You have to admit Millie and her concealer worked wonders. You can barely tell I was in a bar brawl a couple of days ago.” Matt grinned back. “She told me she does makeup for the local theater group.”

“To make your face look good, she has to be a miracle worker.” Jared nudged the lawyer with his elbow.

“Ha ha.”

After they got their drinks, Jared wandered towards a corner by the stairs to the boxes. He looked tense, watching each arrival through the door. Matt kept glancing at him in a way that made Jensen wonder what was going on. They’d just finished their coffee when Jared suddenly stiffened. Jensen followed his look. A well-dressed woman in her early sixties was standing at the door with a younger couple. The older woman was glancing around the room as they entered, like she was looking for someone.

“Let’s go up to the box,” Jared said, keeping an eye on the trio.

“Right,” Matt agreed.

“What’s going on?” Jeff asked.

“The harpy and her chicks just arrived,” Matt replied.

“I’m ready, I’ve been waiting since we arrived.” Jeff grinned with excitement.

“Good.” Jared nodded curtly, still focused on the trio making their way through the room, and led the way up the stairs. The usher smiled at Jared as they approached, opening the door to the box and waiting as they went in. Jared paused and spoke with the man for a few moments in hushed tones. The usher nodded, and hurried away.

Jensen sat between Jared and Jeff, although judging from the look of unreserved joy on his father’s face, Jeff didn’t care where he was sitting. All that mattered was that he was there. Every now and then, he would cast a blinding smile towards them, and then he would turn his attention back to the musicians as they assembled on stage. When the orchestra tuned up, Jensen glanced through his program aware Jeff was doing the same thing. As the lights dimmed, Jared took his hand with a warm smile.

The opening notes of the first piece, Haydn’s Symphony 81 in G major, began and Jensen glanced at his father. Jeff had a small smile on his face, his eyes half closed. In the pause between the first and second movement there was a smattering of applause. Jeff sighed and shook his head. Jensen couldn’t help smiling. It was one of his father’s pet peeves, and they had heard about it more than once.

When the symphony was over, the orchestra left the stage to prepare for Stephens’ solo performance. The excitement flowing off Jeff was enough to make Jensen grin at both Matt and

Jared before patting his father on the back. Stephens came out, bowed and seated himself. Jeff scooted forward on his chair, his eyes focused on the stage.

Stephens paused until the hall was filled with silence, only broken by the occasional cough from the crowd. He drew his bow across the strings and began playing Bach's Cello Sonata No. 1 in G. Thanks to his father's love of the Bach Sonatas and this one in particular, it was one of Jensen's absolute favorite pieces of music and he closed his eyes as the music played. The first movement always made him think of the way sun and shadow chased each other across the face of Mount Rainier. When something brushed his left arm, he opened his eyes and noticed Jeff's hand was clasped as if he were holding a bow, his hand moving along with Stephens'. The look of pure, raw emotion on his father's face was enough to make Jensen's throat tighten. Jared must have sensed something, he started to gently caress Jensen's right hand.

The last note faded into the silence of the hall. It took another second before the applause began. Jeff was on his feet, applauding and shouting "bravo" a moment after that. The applause slowly grew to a crescendo and held there for three bows from Stephens. Once he exited the stage after the third bow, the lights came on and the audience began to head for the exits.

"No need to hurry, Andy will have our drinks ready for us," Matt said as they waited behind a long line of people exiting the floor.

"That's handy." Jeff dodged a woman pushing her way towards the door to the lobby, shoving people out of her way left and right. "Where's the fire?"

"The ladies room. They usually have a line out the door at intermission and it's kind of a survival of the fittest thing getting there before it starts to get busy. The last time we were here, there was nearly a riot." Matt laughed as they made their way out the door and towards the stairs.

"Jared, good to see you," an older man said as he approached.

"You take off, I'll catch up." Jared smiled at them. "I'll be down as soon as I can."

"We'll keep the coffee warm." Matt led the way downstairs. "That's the chairman of the board for the symphony. He makes a point of lurking for Jared every time we come."

"Looking for donations?" Jeff asked.

"Occasionally. He tends to limit things like that to every other visit and since this is a fundraiser, it might just be aimless gossip."

"I'm not sure which is worse." Jensen spotted Jared coming down the stairs.

"The gossip," Matt said with a grimace. "Trust me, George is as bad as a fishwife."

"What did you just say?" Jeff frowned at Matt, his eyes twinkling with humor.

"You heard me." Matt laughed.

"Hey," Jared said as he joined them.

"You escaped earlier than usual," Matt said.

"Mrs. Higgins caught up with him before she headed to the bar." Jared chuckled. "Poor George."

"Poor, poor George indeed," Matt agreed, shaking his head.

"Before she grabbed him, though, I had a chance to talk to him. Are you free tomorrow, Jeff?"

"Well, I have the weekly..."

"He's free," Jensen answered.

"Why?" Jeff asked suspiciously.

"You're going to the Master Class and joining Stephens for coffee after the class."

"I'm what?" Jeff was staring at Jared like he'd grown a second head. "What?" He blinked.

“George owed me one.” Jared smiled at Jeff, his dimples showing.

“Mr. Padalecki,” Andy said, suddenly appearing from behind a group of people with a tray in his hands. “Here are your drinks, sorry it took so long. Look, I wanted you to know something.” He glanced nervously over his shoulder. “They’re here and headed this way.”

“What’s going on?” Jensen asked when Jared tensed as a wave of perfume swept over them.

“Shit.” Matt swore under his breath.

“Darling,” the woman Jensen had seen at the door right before the concert said, walking up to them. Behind her trailed a woman and a man in a trendy suit that looked out of place among the dark suits the rest of the men were wearing.

“Mother.” Jared turned to her with a fake smile pasted on his face.

“Who are your... friends?” she purred, turning a disapproving look on Jensen and Jeff.

“My mother.” Jared nodded at her. “My sister and her husband.” He nodded at the others.

“Is that anyway to introduce me?” She smiled at Jensen. “Are you his new... do you call them boyfriends, darling?” Her purring voice had a note of venom in it.

“Didn’t know you swung that way, Matty,” the man said, coming closer. “But it figures his *tastes* would rub off on you.”

“What’s that?” Jeff stepped in front of Matt, gently easing Jensen out of the way. His voice sounded so pleasant, Jensen started to worry.

“Just curious, you know,” the blue-eyed man said. There was something familiar him—his voice and the way he was standing.

“It’s good to meet you, Collins, isn’t it?” Jeff smiled at him, his eyes narrowed.

“Call me Misha,” he said.

“Misha.” Jeff took another step closer to the man. “What were you asking?”

“If you are, you know, *with* Matty.”

“And?” Jeff’s eyebrows went up in a look that Jensen knew all too well. It was the look that meant you were in way over your head and it was time to apologize for whatever had happened and offer to do his work as well as your own for a month. It was one of the looks you tried to avoid at all costs.

Collins seemed completely unaware of the danger he was in, he smiled at the women and looked back at Jeff. “Well?”

Jensen glanced back at Matt at the same moment Jeff did. The lawyer raised one eyebrow and Jeff’s smile grew into a lopsided grin. He stepped back and dropped his arm over Matt’s shoulders. “Think what you want.”

A look of disgust crossed Collins face before he fixed a cold look on Matt. “Fred’s been trying to reach you all week.”

“I got his messages. I spent the week out of the office,” Matt said, leaning against Jeff suggestively.

“He did,” Jeff agreed with a happy smile.

Jared’s mother frowned at the two, then turned to Jared with a haughty look. “Really, darling, I wish you would control your underlings.”

“Carol, there you are,” a woman swept up to them before anyone could respond to Jared’s mother. “I’ve been looking for you. I’m simply dying to introduce you to my friends from London. You’ll *adore* their daughter.” She tucked her arm through Jared’s mother’s. “You will excuse us, Jared?”

“Of course.”

“Ta,” she said as she pulled the trio away and across the room.
“Looks like you owe George.” Matt laughed. “That’s his wife,” he explained to Jensen and Jeff.

“I guess I do.” Jared looked uncomfortable. “Sorry about that.”

“Nothing to be sorry for,” Jensen said, stepping closer so their arms could brush.

“Jensen? Are you okay?” Jared looked down at him with a concerned frown.

“I don’t know.” Something about Collins was bothering him. He couldn’t be sure why, but something was ringing in the back of his head like an alarm on low. “I’m not sure.”

“Intermission’s nearly over, let’s head back upstairs and avoid the rush,” Matt suggested.

“Let’s,” Jeff said. Jensen looked at his father in surprise, there was an undercurrent in his voice that sounded odd. Even though there was a smile on Jeff’s face, his arm still over Matt’s shoulders, his eyes were fixed on Collins with a look that was utterly terrifying.

Twenty-Nine

Monday

There was a soft haze along the foothills, making them appear almost blue. Here and there a golden shaft of sunlight danced on the ridges making a patchwork of green and gold against the softer blues. The mountain was shining bright white against the sky, standing comfortably above the haze. Jensen was trying to focus on that, rather than the near-agony pulsing through his arm and hands. He was leaning against the seat in Jared’s truck, urging the painkillers to work faster. It was the worst it had been in a long time and he pulled out the prescription bottle again, looking at the “take one or two as needed” notation. He’d rarely taken two, but if he didn’t get this under control things would get unbearable. He debated taking it as he watched Jared and his father having an animated discussion beside Jeff’s truck. Judging by the hand gestures from Chris, Quinn and Matt, they were involved in the “discussion” as well. Jensen saw the nurse peek out the window and shake her head.

He smiled, the whole family showing up for his appointment had taken the doctor by surprise, but Dr. Speight bounced back well from the shock and included the family in the discussion both before and after the exam. Partway through the initial discussion, he’d asked to include his partner, a neurosurgeon, in the consultation as well. They had both given Jensen a thorough exam, and after had returned to the office where the family was gathered and given them their initial impressions. There were tests that needed to be run, things that they needed to check, but they cautiously said there was hope.

Hope.

The word bounced around his chest like a crazed butterfly. Every time he thought about the doctors’ calm assessment of things, his heart started racing. He didn’t want to believe, he was trying to talk himself down from the happiness that was boiling through him, but it wasn’t working. It was one more good thing in a string of good things.

Despite the meeting with Jared’s mother at the concert, the rest of the evening on Saturday had gone well. Stephens had returned to the stage to play one of Boccherini’s cello concertos, then finished the night with an encore with several members of the symphony in performing Boccherini’s Quintet in C Major G. 324, Op.30 No.6 “La music notturna delle strade

di Madrid.” The applause afterwards had been deafening and Jeff was leading the “bravos”. On the way home he had talked non-stop about the performance.

Then, yesterday had started with the Sunday tradition of family breakfast. And it had been a good day. They family had split up to get things done before Jeff left to go to the masterclass. Jared had gone with Quinn to help with the horses, Matt, Chris, Jeff and Jensen had worked on getting things set for the next few days at the café and worked on things that could be harvested in advance. By the time Jeff had to leave, a bulk of the work was done. His father had been distracted as he worked, a smile lighting his face all morning. It was infectious and the garden had been full of laughter even after he left. After a late lunch, Jensen had gone out to get flowers for the week and Jared had helped first with the flowers, then with some weeding and trimming that needed to be done to get the gardens ready for fall plants. Matt joined them for an hour and things were well on the way to being prepared for planting in the next week or two.

Jeff arrived home in time for dinner, and shared his day with them as they ate. He was still buzzing with excitement and after thanking Jared for the tenth or twelfth time, talked non-stop while they ate. They all quizzed him about the masterclass and coffee and sunset came and went while they were still at the table. When Jensen finally stood, planning to get ready to head back to Jared’s for his work week, the family informed him they’d decided it would be best if they all stuck together—that night and the next morning. Jared had slept in the tiny guestroom next on the second floor and the family had breakfast together before the appointment.

“Take another one if you need it, son,” Jeff’s voice snapped him out of the memories.

“What?” He looked over at his father, wondering how Jeff managed to get beside the truck without Jensen noticing.

“You’re hurting, take another.”

“He’s right,” Chris added, joining Jeff beside the truck.

“Of course he’s right,” Quinn agreed.

“I have a bottle of water,” Jared said, opening the back door on the driver’s side. “Here you go.” He closed the door and then climbed in the truck.

“Let me know how the meeting goes, so I can get the contracts ready.” Matt leaned against Jared’s door.

“Meeting?” Jensen asked, opening the water and taking another pill.

“You’re going with me to a meeting.”

“But I have work...” Jensen trailed off.

“Can you work without hurting yourself?” Matt asked seriously. His eye was still bruised, but it was fading. “Wait.” The lawyer held up a hand. “I mean without causing yourself pain.”

Jensen wondered how Matt had known what he was about to say. “No,” he answered honestly. Judging by the frowns from his family, they all knew what he’d been about to say.

“Then go with him to the meeting.” Matt looked back at Jared. “I’m working from, uh, home today.”

“He is.” Jeff nodded in confirmation.

“What are you up to?” Jared looked from Matt to Jeff and back again.

“Nothing.” Quinn nodded happily. “Up to nothing.”

“Yep. Nothing.” Chris grinned.

“We should go before we’re implicated in whatever they’re planning,” Jensen said.

“Probably a good idea,” Matt agreed with a smile. “Go, have your meeting and bring me back something good from the bakery.”

“Bring all of us something good,” Jeff corrected him.

“Fine. Try to avoid jail,” Jared said with a huff. Matt clapped him on the shoulder. Jared turned the truck on and pulled out of the lot.

They were quiet as Jared made the turn onto Highway 164 from Enumclaw to Auburn. Jensen watched the fields go by as the pain slowly started backing off to manageable.

“Can I ask you something?” Jared said after several minutes of companionable silence.

“Of course you can.”

“What is it with Jeff and the cello? And don’t say he’s just a fan, it’s more than that.”

“It is,” Jensen agreed a little reluctantly. “He doesn’t talk about it much, he never has, but he was a cellist. He was going to school for it.”

“But?”

“He had a scholarship, but it wasn’t enough so he joined the National Guard. He got called up for Desert Storm. Don’t misunderstand me, he didn’t resent it. He went willingly. He hadn’t been back all that long before he met us. When he got home, he didn’t go back to school, he told us that was in the past. That person was dead and a new person had been born.”

“Does he still play?”

“He did.” Jensen tried to ignore the twist in his chest.

“Did?”

“After the attack.” He cleared his throat. “He sold the cello. It was enough to pay some of the bills so they could keep things going while I was in the hospital.”

“Hey,” Jared said softly, reaching over and taking his hand. “It’s not your fault.”

“He’s said that too, more than once. It’s hard not to feel responsible, though. If I hadn’t been attacked...” He looked out the window for a moment, trying to shake the sudden emotion. “Where are we going?”

“A bakery. I’m considering carrying some of their stuff at my Northwest shops.” He glanced over with a smile. “Matt discovered it and fell in love with their cookies. I’ll admit they’re some of the best I’ve had, especially the sugar cookies.”

“I like sugar cookies with coffee, they go with it, but don’t overwhelm it.”

“Exactly!” Jared beamed at him. “And these are particularly suited to coffee. The pastry isn’t too sweet, and it has a vanilla glaze that gets a little soft if you’re a dunker, but doesn’t melt into the coffee. You’ll have to try some before I make the deal.”

“I’ll try one, but you shouldn’t rely on my opinion.”

“Why not?” Jared asked seriously.

“I don’t know that much about...”

“You know what you like. You’ll tell me if it’s not good. That’s what I want.” Jared’s voice was totally different from the usual tone he used when they were speaking. There was a hard edge to it. “I have experts in the company, then tend to be a bit snobbish and that’s not what I am looking for.”

“You’re not?” Jensen asked, not sure he liked the hard tone, but Jared didn’t talk about his company and Jensen was curious.

“No, that’s not what it’s about for me. I want to appeal to the people that don’t want a snobbish cup of coffee. Okay, that’s not quite right. Sure, I want that business. More than that, though, I want the people who love coffee. People who might not have really thought about it much.” His voice had warmed. “People well, like me, I told you I never thought much about coffee before I bought my first shop. I want people like that, people who might not have realized the difference a roast could make, people who covered their coffee with flavors, but now want it just black—or with cream and sugar.”

“It’s about the coffee,” Jensen said, knowing that wasn’t exactly what he wanted to say.

“It is. That’s why I am so excited about my new project I told you about. It’s a way to bring coffee people together—growers, roasters, consumers.” He smiled. “Which is why your opinion on the cookies matters. Consider it part of your job.”

“Tasting pastries?” Jensen smiled. “I can live with that.”

“Good.” Jared smiled back.

The bakery was in a beautifully restored Art Deco building. After introductions, Jared and the owner headed to the offices over the store to discuss business. The manager, after discovering Jensen’s enthusiasm for Art Deco, showed him around the building. The restoration had been lovingly done, and even the smallest decorations had been restored to their former glory. Jensen was enchanted, and pulled his phone out to take some pictures. The bakery’s retail space was full of antique display cases and the pastries looked like something out of a carefully dressed movie set. Once the “tour” was ended, Jensen chatted with the employees while they convinced him to try almost everything they offered. When they found out his family owed Heavy Horses Café they put together a large box of treats for Jensen to take home to the family. The manager and the Master Baker both promised to come to dinner in the next few weeks. By the time Jared and the owner emerged from the office, Jensen felt like he’d spent the time with friends and as they left, he promised to return soon.

On the way home, Jared talked about the deal he’d made with the owner to carry several kinds of cookies, the baker’s signature vanilla scones and croissants. He was happy with the deal and once they were on the highway towards Enumclaw, he called Matt and asked him to get the contracts ready. The lawyer promised they would be ready first thing in the morning and quickly broke the connection. Jensen was immediately suspicious, and asked Jared if he’d noticed the background noise in the call. Jared had, and they both suspected Matt was nowhere near the farm—or his office—when he’d answered the call.

Their suspicions were confirmed when they pulled up at the farm half an hour later. Jared had just turned off the engine when Jeff’s truck pulled up beside him and he and the lawyer got out. They both had the smug look again, but before Jared could question them, Quinn and Chris came out the door. Jensen handed over the huge box of pastries and had promptly been hauled out into the gardens to supervise harvest of fresh items for service that night. No one would let him work, not that he really felt he could do much. He’d been forced to take another dose of meds, the pain was getting the best of him, and after family dinner, Jared had taken him back to the house.

It felt good to be back in his quiet apartment. The pain was starting to affect his emotions and he’d heard the sharpness in his voice more than once that afternoon. More than once when he’d snapped at one of the others he wondered who was the jerk in his clothes. The family was forgiving, but Jensen had breathed a sigh of relief when he’d walked into the apartment. He hated when the pain got the best of him, even though he knew the family understood. If anything, it was something of the family disease. They all had pain that occasionally overrode everything else, so they were more accepting of it than most. Jensen had felt especially bad when, right before they left, he’d snapped at Jared. The other man had looked hurt, but Quinn had stepped in, made a joke and pulled Jared aside. When they’d returned few moments later, Jared was smiling and his eyes were full of concern.

He was getting ready to take a shower—it was still early, but it felt like it had been a long day—when the doctors’ office called with a string of appointments over the next couple of weeks

for various tests, starting with an EMG on Wednesday. Jensen texted the information to Jeff, trusting his father to let the rest of the family know, and climbed in the shower. The hot water helped ease the ache in his hands and arm, and when he got out, he was feeling considerably better. Jared tapped on his door shortly after seven and Jensen joined him for an evening of TV nestled on the couch.

Thirty

Wednesday

It felt cold outside after the warmth of the gallery. There was water dripping, sounding almost like footsteps. "I want to talk to you," a voice said from the shadows behind him. The footsteps were getting closer, hurried. He turned to see who'd spoken and pain slammed through his body as he hit the ground. The agony in his arm was beyond anything he'd ever experienced. He thought he heard voices. The ground was ice cold, something cut into his body as he rolled into a ball to protect himself. Agony spiked through his arm. There was warmth on his arm and his face, flowing down as the pain continued. He knew he screamed—words, a sound of agony—he wasn't sure. The voices stopped. There was a shout and the blows driving into him again and again stopped. Footsteps clattered away from him, sounding a bit like the horses when they ran through the barn. "Jensen," a gentle voice said. He didn't recognize the voice and pulled away, trying to escape the pain. "Jensen!"

"What?" Jensen blinked. He was in the doctor's office. The warm hand on his chest was Matt's, a frown of concern on his face. The doctor's kind eyes reflected worry as well.

"Are you okay?" Matt asked.

"I'm sorry, Jensen, I had no idea," Dr. Benedict said, trailing off.

"What happened?" Jensen sat up.

"You blanked out for a minute." Matt met his eyes. "Are you okay?"

"I should have considered that before I started," the doctor said, shaking his head.

"Considered what?" Matt growled, sounding remarkably like Jeff.

"The possibility of kicking something off."

"So you knew?" Matt continued in the same voice.

"It was a possibility," he replied carefully. "It's happened once or twice before."

"And you didn't say anything?"

"I wasn't thinking."

"That's obvious." The growl in Matt's voice was replaced by something else, every bit as scary.

"I'm sorry." Dr. Benedict raised his hands and backed away from them.

"I'm okay, Matt." Jensen took a shaky breath. The test had been painful, and the effects were lingering. He needed to get out of the office before the combination of pain and the medicinal smell kicked off something worse than a flashback. "Can we go?"

"Yes, I'll go through the tests and we'll discuss them after everything else is done." He smiled at Jensen, then turned to Matt. "I *am* sorry. I'll make a note of it. It won't happen again."

"Better not," Matt muttered as they left. They walked out and got into the elevator. Matt poked the button for their floor with more violence than was needed. "Let's get a cup of coffee," Matt said as the doors opened. "There's a coffee counter here that carries our coffee."

“Sure.” Jensen waited while Matt got them coffees, then trailed behind him as they walked to the car.

“Here,” Matt said once they were seated in the Mercedes. He reached over and opened the glove box and pulled out a prescription bottle. “I brought these.”

“How...?” Jensen began, looking at the bottle. They were his meds, but he’d been sure he’d left them at home. He had considered bringing them, but changed his mind.

“Jeff said you might leave them behind, so I snagged them on the way out of your apartment when I picked you up.”

“Thanks,” Jensen said honestly. “I didn’t realize it would be quite that bad.”

“It looks like it was designed by torturers.”

“You’re only saying that because of the needles.” Jensen took a pill and chased it with coffee.

“Needles they ran an electric current through—and then they got out the cattle prod!”

“I’m not sure which hurt worse, although the needle in the thumb thing...”

“I was looking away,” the lawyer said with a smile, pulling into traffic. “I’m not all that fond of needles. I’m not in the fainting class of needle fear, but definitely in the try to avoid them at all class group. Every time we give blood, Jared teases me about it. So, I thought looking away was a good idea.”

“I was too.” Jensen laughed. “It was that last one in my arm that caused the problem, I think.”

“Yes,” Matt growled. “He should have said something! It’s a good thing Quinn wasn’t there, he would have thrown him out the window.”

“He might have,” Jensen agreed.

“I damn near did.” He hit the brakes a little hard. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay.”

“About everything, I mean. I should have researched the test better and planned for anything.”

“Things happen.”

“Not around me, they don’t!” the lawyer snapped, then looked sheepish. “It’s kind of my job, you know, keeping on top of things like that.”

“It is?”

“It is. It’s one I gave myself shortly after Jared became my roommate. We looked out for each other, don’t get me wrong, but when *someone* likes to take leaps, it helps to have someone else make sure they are not leaping into pools of lava or something.”

As Matt spoke, something occurred to Jensen. “All the times you’ve ‘started something’.”

“Yep. In all but two cases. He doesn’t know. Don’t enlighten him, okay?”

“That depends.”

“On?” Matt glanced over at him.

“Are you planning to start a brawl with Dr. Benedict?”

“Uh,” Matt colored. “Not until after he fixes you?”

“As long as you wait until after.”

Matt laughed. “I will.” He was quiet for a moment. “I hope it’s okay.”

“Beating up my doctors?”

“No, the ‘we are part of the family now’ thing.” He cleared his throat. “I never thought we’d have a family after my grandparents died. Jared’s family is worse than useless, and once Corey was gone, it was just me and Jared.”

“I was planning on asking you the same thing. If you were okay with it.”

“I was stunned, you know, when Jeff followed me out after I quit and asked what was going on. I didn’t tell him much, but something and he offered his help. I demurred, but he said...”

“Family sticks together,” Jensen finished for him.

“Word for word. I didn’t believe him at first. I promised I’d keep in touch and left. When I called later and said I was going to Dusty’s, he said he was coming and repeated the family thing.” He paused. “I asked him about it.”

“What’d he say?” Jensen asked, although he was pretty sure he knew the answer.

“He said he knew family when he saw it, and it wasn’t the first time he’d taken in a stray or two.”

“It’s true,” Jensen agreed. “He doesn’t take in many though.”

“I understand, and it means...” He blinked several times.

“I know.” Jensen nodded, remembering when Jeff had asked if they could be a family. “I guess you’re stuck with us.”

“I’m okay with that. How are you feeling?”

“Better. Coffee always helps.” Jensen took another drink of coffee. The pain tingled along his arm. The test had set off more than discomfort. He was glad Matt had grabbed his meds. He took a breath and started to ask the question that had been at the back of his mind for weeks. “Matt, Jared’s family...”

“They are family only in the unfortunate coincidence of genetics,” he growled and gripped the steering wheel so tightly his knuckles showed white. “I make it a point to not hate people. It’s a waste of energy for the most part. But those people I well and truly hate. I’d never actually known what hate felt like until we were fifteen.”

“What happened?”

“By then, Jared spend most school breaks and vacations with me at my grandparent’s place, he told me he didn’t want to go home. His parents were drunks, and not kind. I’d never met them. I just knew someone who wasn’t afraid of anything was afraid to go back to their house.” Matt paused as he took the exit for 167 and then onto highway 410 towards Sumner. “Winter term when we were fifteen, he had to go their house for the weekend. I offered to go, but he said he would be okay. I should have insisted.” Matt ground his teeth together. “He got back to school on Tuesday, broken arm, black eyes, stiches and marks on his arm I later found out were from fingernails.”

“What?” Jensen asked, hearing the horror in his voice.

“Brother Thomas, our advisor, was shocked. He called Jared’s parents, his mother’s lawyer answered. He informed the school Jared had been in a skiing accident.”

“A skiing accident?” Jensen asked dubiously.

“That was their story and they were sticking to it. I’m not sure, exactly, what Brother Thomas and Father Christopher, the Prior, did, but Jared never went back to his parents for any break after that. I was shocked when his mother showed up when the first shop started doing well and tried to blackmail Jared into giving her a share. His father had cut her allowance—they were starting to struggle financially a bit—and she needed money. She thought if I found out Jared

was gay it would somehow change the friendship. But that incident is what made me focus on becoming a lawyer.”

“Really?”

“She got her lawyer involved. In fact, it was the first time I met Lehne’s sleazy little gopher, Collins. I knew Jared needed a bodyguard, as it were. Not the brawny kind, but the kind that could fight her lawyer’s fire with fire. Simply put, Jared needed good legal counsel and a lawyer that was always and completely on his side. Someone that could not be purchased, no matter what the other side tried to bring into the fight. I knew the only way to make sure of that was to become a lawyer myself. I’ve been keeping an eye on their bullshit since.” He shook his head.

“I…” Jensen was shocked. He had no idea how Jared could talk to, let alone be relatively civil, with his family.

“But,” he said, with a sudden smile. “I’m not alone in that anymore.”

“True, although you might want to avoid telling Chris that story. He might do something rash.”

“It was hard enough to keep Jeff from doing something rash,” Matt agreed with a chuckle.

They were quiet for a moment. Matt was maneuvering through heavier than normal traffic up the hill. When they reached the top, Jensen pulled out his phone and took a picture of the mountain, planning to share it with Jared when they got home. He was idly watching a small sports car zipping up the shoulder when a thought occurred to him. “I remembered something,” he blurted out, then realized he’d said it out loud when Matt looked over at him with a quizzical frown.

“Remembered what?” Matt looked confused.

“About the attack.” He wasn’t sure what he should say. Had their actually been a voice? Had it been familiar? Or were things getting jumbled?

“That night, we were over in the corner of the gallery,” Matt said when Jensen didn’t say anything more. “We were standing where we had a clear view of *The Mountain Before the Storm*. Jared had been trying to get a chance to talk to you. Like I said, he can get awkward at the oddest times. He’d been collecting your stuff for years, but only had the chance to meet you once, more than a decade ago in Arizona. He finally saw his chance and handed me his glass, but you’d stepped outside. We waited for a couple of minutes, then started drifting across the room, to catch you on the way back in. We were still waiting when we heard someone—I realize now it was Jeff—shouting for 911.”

“So you were both inside when it happened?” Jensen heard himself asking, surprised at the emotion in his voice.

“What’s up?” Matt looked over with a frown on his face.

“You were inside,” Jensen repeated.

“What’s going on?”

Jensen took a deep breath. “I…” He shook his head.

Matt pulled the car off the road, onto a gravel area in a vacant lot. He turned in the seat so he could face Jensen. “What is it?”

Jensen realized his hands were shaking. The reaction was completely unexpected. There was a sense of relief that was making him a little lightheaded. It hadn’t been Jared. Along with the relief was a nagging sense of guilt. “I don’t remember much about the attack.”

“Mm hmm.” The lawyer nodded encouragingly. “But you said you remembered?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe I heard you talking to the doctor? Or the doctor talking to me?”
“What did you remember?” Matt asked gently, but firmly.
“I think someone said they wanted to talk to me?” Jensen made the statement into a question. He was starting to doubt the memory.
“What were the exact words?”
“Just, uh, ‘I want to talk to you’, I think.”
“How long between the question and the attack?” Matt asked.
“There wasn’t really any time between them, or not much.” He frowned. “The voice seems familiar somehow.”
“It does? Would you know it if you heard it again?”
“Maybe?” Jensen closed his eyes trying to dredge up the voice again. “I’m not sure.”
“But maybe?” Matt demanded.
“I think so.” He opened his eyes, and the look on the lawyer’s face was startling. “What does it mean?”
“It means Jeff might be right,” Matt said, pulling back onto the road.
“Jeff might be right about what?”
“There was a witness.”

Thirty-One

Wednesday

The gardens were quiet as Jensen walked through them. He had considered grabbing a basket and harvesting tomatoes, but his hands and arms were still buzzing with residual pain from the EMG. He was feeling a tinge of guilt. He hadn’t done much at the farm or the house for what was beginning to feel like months. He wasn’t sure why he’d been surprised when Matt brought him here, rather than the house. Once they arrived, a family meeting had been called, and they were waiting for Jared to arrive before they started. Jensen had taken the opportunity to escape into the quiet of the gardens while the rest of the family got ready. He was a little worried, the further he got from the memory, the more he questioned if he’d actually heard something.

“Jared’s pulling in!” Chris called.
“Coming,” Jensen shouted back and headed towards the café.
“You want a coffee?” Quinn asked as he walked in. “Or is that a dumb question?”
“What do you think?” Jensen replied with grin.
“Oh the way.” He headed into the foyer. “Hey, Jared, coffee?” Jensen heard him asked as the front door opened.
“Yeah, thanks.” Jared came into the café, a smile lighting his face when he saw Jensen.
“Hey,” he said, coming over and pulling him into a quick hug.
“How was the meeting?” Jensen leaned against him for a moment, then stepped back.
“It went really well.” Jared rubbed his hands together. “Really well. How was the test?”
“Better than a poke in the eye with a sharp stick,” Jensen replied with a smile.
“Only just, though,” Matt said as he and Jeff walked in the back door.
“What?” Jared looked from Matt to Jensen.

“It wasn’t that bad,” Jensen assured him.

“If you consider electrified needles not bad,” Quinn said, coming in with a tray of coffee.

“What?” Jared exclaimed.

“The test was not pleasant.” Matt sat down at the table and reached for one of the coffees. “In fact, that’s part of the reason we’re here.”

“Matt…” Jensen began.

“Nope, family deals with all shit together,” Chris said, holding up a hand before Jensen could finish.

“And it’s time to deal with some of the shit that’s come up recently.” Jeff sat down, grabbed a coffee and waited as they all got settled. “I had the opportunity to meet Jared’s relations on Saturday,” Jeff began, a frown on his face. “I was surprised when I recognized them.”

“You did?” Jensen looked at his father in surprise.

“I did. They were at the opening that night. In fact, Collins was part of a group I was speaking with before the attack. He’d tried to talk to me alone once or twice that night, but I managed to avoid him. I figured he was just one of *those* types and I didn’t want to deal with the bullshit. He managed to worm his way into a small group, though and managed to offend at least two of the others, so they left.”

“That was Collins?” Chris asked.

“It was. He’s also the one I saw leave the building right before Jensen stepped outside. I thought he’d gotten the hint and left. I mentioned him to the police, but I didn’t have a name and there were a lot of people there that night. But things have changed.”

“What things?” Quinn demanded.

“Jensen?” Jeff said gently. “Tell them what happened during the test.”

“I remembered something,” he said to the table, pushing away the shame that always accompanied admitting he was missing pieces of that night. “I think someone asked to talk to me right before it happened.” Something else flitted through his mind. “You know, when we met Collins, something about him struck me as familiar.”

“Why didn’t you tell us?” Matt asked before anyone else could.

“It was just a fleeting impression.” Jensen shrugged.

“That would have been handy to know Monday,” Quinn muttered.

“What was that?” Jared frowned at the table at large. “What have you been up to?” He turned to Matt.

“Doing my job, Boss.” Matt looked unperturbed by the glare Jared had fixed on him. “Would you recognize his voice?”

“He didn’t Saturday,” Jared pointed out.

“That was before the test bringing the memory back,” Matt said reasonably. He pulled his phone out and set it on the table. “Let’s see.”

“Matty, I wasn’t expecting to hear from you today,” Collins’ voice came over the speaker.

“I need a little information.”

“Oh yeah? Why aren’t you calling Fred?”

“No need, it pertains to you.” Matt glanced at Jensen with a questioning look. Jensen shook his head, he wasn’t sure.

“It’s kind of handy you calling, I want to talk to you,” Collins said.

Jensen froze. It was the same voice, the same intonation. His hands started to tremble as he met Matt’s eyes and nodded.

“Too bad.” Matt reached for the phone.

“What?”

“Got all the information I need.” Matt broke the connection. “Jensen? Are you sure?”

“Yes,” he answered, hearing the tremble in his voice. Jared put his arm around him. “It was him, I’m sure of it.” Now that he heard Collins again, he couldn’t stop the memory playing over and over.

“Matt?” Jared whispered, looking sick.

“No, I don’t think he was the attacker, he doesn’t have the balls,” Matt said fiercely. “You know that as well as I do, but he might have seen who it was.”

“Then what?” Chris asked. “We don’t even know if he saw anything and not coming forward isn’t a crime.”

“No.” Matt smiled at Jeff. “No, it’s not.”

“But it means we have some leverage,” Jeff finished with a wicked grin.

“Leverage?” Quinn looked confused for a moment, then a slow smile spread across his face. “I hope you aren’t thinking what I’m thinking.”

“I’m pretty sure I’m thinking what you’re thinking.” Chris was smiling too.

“What are you thinking?” Jared asked the table at large, but focused on Matt.

“I need to follow up on a few things, but this might be the break we’ve been looking for. Not only to hopefully track down who attacked Jensen, but to get them off our back as well.”

Thursday

The scent of coffee filled the apartment as Jensen walked into the kitchen. The morning light was slanting in the windows, promising a sunny day. He hoped to get some work done on the gardens and maybe the stable. His pain was back down into the manageable level this morning, although dark bruises marked several places where the needles had been placed. He added milk and sugar to his coffee and leaned against the counter. There were no medical tests today and he was looking forward to spending the day working at the house. He was starting to feel a little knot of not panic, but something unsettling, and he needed to get something done to work it off.

He finished his coffee, rinsed his cup and headed up the stairs to the main house. “Morning,” he said as he opened the door.

“Hey,” Jared replied, starting a cup of coffee without asking, then coming over and pulling Jensen against him. “How are you feeling?”

“Better.” Jensen smiled up at him. “Sorry about last night.”

“It’s okay, it wasn’t like they had a chance of winning, so sleeping though the last couple of innings was a good idea.”

“True, they are kind of sucking,” Jensen agreed with a laugh.

“They really are.” Jared bent to capture his mouth in a kiss, pulling away as the coffeemaker gurgled to a stop.

While Jared made himself a cup, Jensen sliced some of Chris’ raisin bread and dropped it into the toaster. He grabbed the honey butter out of the fridge and set it on the island. When the toast popped, he set it on a plate and put it beside the butter and sat down across from Jared.

“I think I’m getting addicted to this bread,” Jared said as he buttered a slice. “I honestly think I like it better than the cinnamon rolls.”

“I do too, it’s the sourdough, I think.”

“I think so too.” Jared looked thoughtful. “Hmm, I wonder.”

“You wonder?” Jensen asked when Jared didn’t say anything, instead just munching on his piece of toast a small frown curled between his eyebrows.

“Just an idle thought. It needs more substance before I let it out into the light.” He smiled. “What do you have planned for the day?”

“I wanted to work on the gardens, and maybe after lunch the stable. Have you decided what you want to do about the lawns?”

“I have.” Jared’s smile grew into a grin.

“And?”

“Come on,” Jared said, picking up his coffee and leading the way through the house. He opened the door to the garage. “I figured it would do whatever we needed here, and if the neighbors borrowed it, well, no one could complain about that.”

Jensen was staring at the brand new, bright green tractor. It was the one he’d seen on Quinn’s browser more than once. “Jared.”

“I have a lot of lawn,” he said with a shrug. “And if I loan it to a charity…” He grinned.

“I hadn’t thought of that.” Jensen grinned back. “Assuming Quinn gets to use it. There is a lot of lawn to mow. I guess I’ll be forced to change my plans for the day and mow the lawns.”

“Sounds arduous.”

“It’s a tough job, but someone has to do it,” Jensen said as he walked around the tractor.

“I was tempted to get one of those ones that you ride behind, like a surfer.” Jared chuckled. “But I’d never get anything else done if I had one of those in the garage.”

“The lawn would probably be ruined too, if you were out lawn surfing every day. And we won’t even discuss what would happen if Quinn got ahold of one of those.”

“He’d mow the plateau?” Jared laughed.

“At least.”

“Hello?” Matt called from the door to the house.

“In the garage,” Jared replied.

“Looking at the new toy?” Matt asked as he walked in, a coffee cup in his hand.

“It’s a nice toy,” Jensen said.

“The rest of the attachments and things are in the hanger. I had them delivered there, but had this dropped in the garage,” the lawyer said, leaning against Jared’s truck.

“Have you told the rest of the family about it?” Jensen walked over to stand beside Jared.

“No, I figured once they knew, it would be hard to keep them away and I thought you should get first crack at it.”

“Thanks. Is Chris still planning to take me to my MRI tomorrow?” Jensen asked.

“He’ll be here at nine,” Matt answered. “I have those contracts we need to go through before the meeting, Boss.”

“Good.” Jared turned to Jensen. “See you for lunch?”

“Sounds good.”

Jensen watched Matt and Jared head into the house, already discussing the upcoming meeting. Once they were gone, he picked up the manual for the tractor and glanced through it. The mower attachment was already in place and the tank was full of gas. He opened the door, hopped on the tractor and started it, taking a moment to get familiar with it before pulling it out and heading towards the huge lawn on the south side of the house with a happy smile on his face.

Thirty-Two

Saturday

Someone was pulling out of the lot as Jensen turned his truck into the driveway at the farm. He parked behind the house and headed towards the café. The door was open and he could hear the murmur of voices inside. He noticed the flowers needed trimming, one row of dahlias was almost completely bloomed out. There was another half row of cilantro blooming and the first plants he'd let go to seed looked ready to harvest. The tractor was sitting on a patch of grass to the east of the flowers. Jeff had picked it up from Jared the night before so they could use it to break a new patch for greens.

Jensen smiled as he turned to walk to the café. He'd gotten a lot done in the last couple of days, even though part of yesterday morning had been taken up with the MRI. He'd finished mowing all the lawns at the house on Thursday. He hadn't intended to do quite that much, but the mix of sun, fresh cut grass and the rumble of the tractor had let his mind wander. His hands had ached some from the vibration of the motor through the steering wheel, but at the end of the day he felt better than he had in nearly a week. And then yesterday, after the MRI, Jeff had come over to help get started on removing part of a juniper hedge at the front of the house.

The MRI had turned out to be one of the high points of the day, maybe the week. While they were waiting, one of the other patients in the clinic waiting room had recognized Chris and struck up a conversation. She's had surgery several months before and was singing the praises of his doctor, calling him a "miracle worker". Jensen had been only half listening until he heard Dr. Benedict's name. His name had been called called before he had a chance to ask any questions, but the MRI tech had brought up the surgeon as well. He told them Benedict had operated on his cousin, a local sport's star, and had saved his career. By the time they left, the small glow of hope in Jensen's heart was starting to burn bright. He knew the family felt that way as well, Chris brought it up on the way back to the house.

"Coffee?" Quinn asked as Jensen walked through the door of the café.

"Sure." Jensen leaned on the counter. "You're open a little late today."

"I was in here doing stuff and thought I might as well be open."

"And I'm taking a break," Matt said, coming out of the dining room and joining them. "I've just finished dough duty." He frowned. "Where's Jared? Don't bother answering. He's working, right?"

"He got a call right as we were leaving. He said he'd be here as soon as he could." Jensen could hear the worry in his own voice. He had no idea what it took to manage Jared's businesses, but he seemed to spend a lot of time with his laptop or on the phone, even when they were watching TV in the evening. Even the day they took the trip to Eastern Washington, Jared had been on the phone with the office for half an hour as they were leaving town.

"Someone needs to learn that a half day of work is *not* twelve hours," Matt said sourly. "He promised he was going to take it easier."

"Isn't that a little pot calling the kettle?" Quinn handed them both coffees. "Seems to me I heard you on the phone after nine last night."

“Guilty as charged,” Matt said with a good-natured chuckle. “In my defense, it was someone who works mostly nights.”

“Too much work for me.”

“This from the guy who’s up by dawn to take care of the horses, open the coffee bar and works until closing and after every night?” Matt quirked an eyebrow at Quinn.

“Horses aren’t people.”

“No, they are bigger and scarier,” Matt pointed out.

“Only sometimes,” Quinn agreed with nod.

“I’d disagree with…” Matt stopped when his phone rang. He pulled it out of his pocket and answered. “Cohen.” He paused for a moment. “No, we’re done playing,” he snapped. He nodded at them and stepped out the door. “You aren’t understanding me…” The rest was lost as he walked away from them.

“That’s the fourth call like that in two days,” Quinn said, looking at Jensen.

“What do you mean?”

“He gets calls all day, but there have been four where he is more like that.”

“Like?” Jensen was still a little confused.

“Harsh? Curt?” Quinn was obviously searching for the right word. He shook his head.

“More grrrrrr.”

“Did he say who the calls were from?”

“Not yet.”

“Not yet what?” Chris asked, walking in from the back.

“Those calls Matt’s been getting,” Quinn replied. “He just got another.”

“I caught about five words of the one yesterday afternoon. It doesn’t sound good.” Chris sighed. “He did say he’d tell us as soon as he could.”

“He did.” Quinn wiped off the counter and smiled. “Is it lunch yet?”

“Ten minutes.”

“It’s been ten minutes forever.” Quinn drew out the last two syllables into a whine.

“What’s your problem?” Jensen couldn’t help grinning.

“Tractor after lunch,” Quinn said enthusiastically.

“We promised to wait until after the coffee bar closed. We’ve been regretting it since.” Chris rolled his eyes.

“Yeah, yeah, like you aren’t looking forward to tractoring around.”

“Only to fix the mess you make.”

“Fine, I’ll just take my lunch out and eat it on the tractor.”

“Assuming, of course, Jeff doesn’t want the first go on it,” Jensen laughed.

“He already got to use it. He drove it here from Jared’s and *you* got to mow the *whole* property over there before we even got to *see* it.” Quinn sniffed dramatically.

“So tragic.” Jensen shook his head.

The timer chimed from the kitchen. Chris turned to head to the back. “That’s lunch. Quinn, go round up Jeff and Matt. The faster they’re back here, the sooner you can have quality tractor time.”

“Back in a flash,” Quinn said, heading out the door.

The rumble of the tractor, mixed with the other sounds of the garden as Jensen picked tomatoes. He could hear his brothers shouting at each other as they planned out the new bed—or whatever havoc they were currently wreaking with the tractor. After lunch, they’d all headed out

into the gardens. Jensen and Matt to work on harvesting, the rest to “help” with the tractor and the patch of land they were preparing. Every now and then, Jeff’s laugh would pour over the top of the other noises, making Jensen smile.

Working in the gardens helped center him. Things had felt unsettled lately. The doctors, the tests—the growing relationship with Jared—all of it was combining to put him a little on edge. His family continually reassured him about the doctors and how well things were going. Jared made his feelings clear. Still, Jensen felt on edge. He couldn’t quite put his finger on it.

Maybe it was just the season. He tended to get restless in the fall. He loved autumn, it was his favorite season, and he looked forward to it all year. Even so, he was always restless. Jeff had joked with him his entire life that he got the fall “time to move the herds to a new pasture” urge. Sometimes Jensen did wonder if it was some kind of hardwired thing—In spring he would have the same restlessness, although not as pronounced. Of course, for the last two years, he’d watched the season changed aching to be able to paint. The fall often seemed even more colorful than spring and the plateau was filled with every color of red, orange and yellow. The forest would seem brighter from the blanket of leaves from the maples and cottonwoods. *Damn*, he thought, feeling a pull in his hands and a burn in his eyes. As he fought the usual flood of grief, a thought swam through the pain. There was a very real possibility that he might paint again, and soon. He swallowed hard.

“Uh, no riders. Come on,” Matt said from the next row over. “Oh come on! Jensen?”

“Yeah?”

“Can I get a little help here?”

“What’s going on?” Jensen asked as he hurried to where there was a break in the vines.

“I seem to have a new friend.”

“What?” Jensen slipped through the row as Matt turned to him. Jensen tried to stifle a laugh. Matt had a large praying mantis perched on top his head.

“Don’t even think about taking a picture.”

“Never,” Jensen said as he pulled out his phone and snapped a picture. He tucked his phone away and walked over to the lawyer.

“Can you encourage it to leave?”

“Sure.” Jensen reached up and eased the creature onto his hand, then carried it to the end of the row and set it on top one of the posts that supported the framework for the tomatoes.

“Thanks, I didn’t want to hurt it.” He smiled, absently pulling out his phone when it buzzed. “But with my luck it might try to bite my head off.”

“It was big, but not that big.”

Matt was frowning at the screen of his phone. “Thinking of biting my head off, have you heard from the Boss?” he asked casually, shoving the phone back in his pocket.

“Not since I left the house this morning.”

Matt looked at his watch and frowned. “You haven’t missed a call?”

Jensen pulled out his phone and checked his call log. “No.”

“Huh.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Let’s check with Jeff.” Matt headed to where Jeff was standing. “Have you heard from Jared?” Matt asked when he was close enough to be heard over the tractor’s engine.

“Not today. Hey!” Jeff shouted at Quinn. “Hey!”

“What?” Quinn replied.

“Turn it off!” Jeff made a slashing motion to emphasize his request.

“What’s up?” Quinn looked annoyed.

“Have you heard from Jared?” Matt asked.

“Not since last night. Chris?” Quinn turned to their brother.

“No.”

“What’s going on?” Jeff looked at Matt as Quinn and Chris joined them.

“No one has heard from him since Jensen left this morning,” Matt said. “I lost track of time, with the phone call before lunch, then working in the garden.” He glanced across the field towards the road to the house.

“Matt?” Jensen could sense a growing tension in the lawyer.

“I..” He looked away for a moment. “I’ve been working several things that all seem to intersect—the break-in at corporate, the smoke bombs at the house and in the last few days, the information that Collins might have been in the alley that night. That particular bit of information I might have been using a little more aggressively.”

“What does that mean?” Jeff asked with a frown.

“There is a lot more going on than any of us realized.”

“Do you think Collins was behind it?”

“The smoke bombs without a doubt. Our guy at Dusty’s recognized his photo. The others, I’m not positive, but with everything else, it’s enough that I think I can make a move legally.”

“This legal thing? How involved would it be? Are we talking arrests? Or money?”

Quinn’s voice was serious.

“The money for sure, arrests possibly,” Matt replied, looking more and more uncomfortable.

“How much money are we talking about?” Chris asked, glancing at Quinn.

“A lot,” Matt said grimly.

Jeff met his eyes for a moment, looked down, then across the fields toward the house.

“Jensen, give him a call.”

Jensen pulled out his phone and hit autodial, he put it on speaker so the rest could hear. It rang three times.

“Hey,” Jared answered halfway through the fourth ring.

Something sounded off, Jensen could hear it in the other man’s voice. “Hey,” he paused for a moment unsure what to say. “Chris was wondering if you were planning to be here for dinner before we open.”

“I’ve, uh, got a few things to do, I’m not sure I’ll make it.”

“Okay. I’ll have him save some for later.”

“Yeah, that’s a good idea. I’m, uh, going to get back to work. See you later.”

“Yep.” Jensen broke the connection.

“Something’s wrong,” Matt said, chewing on his lip. “I need to get over there.” Matt turned to head out of the garden.

Jeff grabbed him. “No. You could make it worse.”

“Let me go, Jeff.” Matt tried to pull away his eyes wild.

“What aren’t you telling us?” Chris demanded.

“Boys!” Jeff snapped. “Scatter. Jensen, you and Matt go get the baskets and take them inside. Quinn move the tractor behind the house.”

“What?”

“He’s right,” Chris said softly. “If something is wrong, someone might be watching us. We need to make it look normal. You know the drill,” he said to Quinn.

“Right.” Quinn hopped on the tractor and started it up.

“I’m going in and calling the cops.” Jeff frowned at them. “You need to be calm and take things slow. Cops will take less than five to get there.”

“Yes, sir.” Jensen nodded to his father and headed towards the tomatoes to grab his baskets. After a moment, he heard Matt trailing behind them. He grabbed his basket and handed it to Matt, then walked into the squash and retrieved the basket of pattypan squash and eggplant he’d collected earlier. He’d meant to take it in when he was finished, but it had been so nice in the garden he’d decided to take all the baskets at once. They carried them into the café. Quinn and Chris arrived right after they set the vegetables down beside the sink. Jeff came in from the dining room. Jensen was just going to ask what they should do when sirens screamed by on the highway.

The sirens abruptly cut off. Matt made a move towards the door and Quinn stopped him. It seemed like forever as they stood there. Jensen unsure what to do, the rest standing as if they were rooted to the spot.

Matt’s phone ringing broke the silence. “Jared?” Matt slumped against the counter. “Yeah. Are you sure? Okay. Yeah.” He broke the connection, tossed the phone on the counter and put his head in his hands. Jeff walked to him and put an arm over his shoulders. “He’s okay,” the lawyer said through his hands.

“What the hell just happened?” Chris demanded.

“What he said, times five,” Quinn agreed.

“Boys,” Jeff said, a warning in his voice. It was one of his tones that brooked no contradiction.

“Why do I think you know more about what’s going on than we do?” Chris said, frowning at their father. Jensen looked at his brother in surprise. Chris was angry, very angry and Jeff looked defiant and a little guilty.

“Do we need to go get Jared, or is he coming here?” Jensen asked, wondering what was setting his brother off.

“Here,” Matt mumbled.

Jensen waited for someone to break the increasing tension. Finally, he sighed and looked at his brothers. “Maybe we should get on prep until Jared gets here?”

Quinn met his eyes, glanced at Chris, looked over at Jeff and Matt, then back at Jensen. “I’ll make everyone a coffee. Jeff why don’t you and Matt come with me to help carry?”

Jeff nodded and he and Matt followed Quinn through the café, Jeff’s arm still over the lawyer’s shoulders.

They had all the vegetables prepped and Jensen had made two extra trips into the garden for herbs before they heard the large pickup pull up in front of the café. Quinn had brought them coffees and helped with prep. After fifteen minutes of particularly aggressive vegetable chopping, Chris had relaxed enough to start talking about the menu for the night. They were all carefully not talking about what had happened, or the fact that Jeff and Matt were still sitting in the entry. Jensen had checked on them after forty-five minutes. Matt had been on the phone, Jeff scowling at the front door.

By the time Jared pulled in, Chris was working on their dinner, and almost everything was ready to go for service that night. When they heard the truck, Chris washed his hands and

Jensen put the last bin of tomatoes into the refrigerator. Quinn was in the front of the café before Jared turned his engine off and Jensen head him shout a cheerful offer of coffee before the truck door opened. Jensen arrived in the foyer in time to see Matt meet Jared at the door and grab him in a rough hug. When Jared stepped away from the lawyer, he walked to Jensen and pulled him into a tight hug.

“I’ll take that coffee now,” Jared said when he pulled away from Jensen. He reached for the cup in Quinn’s hand then turned to the family with a tired smile.

“Are you okay?” Jeff asked.

“Yeah.” Jared dropped into one of the chair.

Jensen sat down and leaned against him, offering comfort and support. “What happened?” he said when everyone else was seated but the silence had stretched on for several minutes.

“My house is still standing. I’m still here.” Jared huffed out a laugh.

“What?” Quinn looked shocked.

“I’d just finished in the office and was on the second floor grabbing a few things and getting ready to go. I heard something in the kitchen and thought maybe Jensen or Matt had come to yell at me for working too long. I rounded the corner right as he was screwing with the stove.” Jared paused and took a drink of coffee.

“Who?” Chris prompted.

“Collins. I guess I surprised him. He panicked and pulled a gun.” Jared’s voice was calm, but his hands were shaking.

“What?” Matt paled.

“Yeah.” Jared smiled grimly at him. “I wasn’t supposed to be there, I guess, but since I was he had to change plans. He took me into the office and called Lehne to see what to do. He left a message and was pacing back and forth, waving the gun and ranting at me, waiting for a reply when you called. He told me to answer and while I was on the phone, he got his call. They’d just finished when the cops showed up. I thought I’d heard sirens, and kind of hoped it was help, but the sirens stopped. Collins thought it was funny, so when they showed up in the door he wasn’t expecting it. He turned to them, with the gun in his hand, although not pointed at them, and they fired the Taser before he could even get a word out.”

“Taser?” Quinn asked with a wicked smile. “Did he squeal?”

“He did,” Jared said with a lopsided smile. “I probably shouldn’t be happy about this—but he begged them to stop.”

“Did they?” There was something weird in Matt’s voice as he asked the question.

“They did.”

“Too bad.” Matt actually looked disappointed.

“They had to carry him to the squad car. He kept whining he couldn’t walk.” Jared stopped. “How’d you know?” he asked Matt.

“I wasn’t sure. I had a bad feeling.” The lawyer shrugged. “None of us had heard from you and I received a worrying text.”

“While we were in the gardens?” Jensen remembered the lawyer’s frown.

“Yeah.” Matt ran a hand through his hair. “I told you I’d been working on stuff,” he said to the table at large. “The text was from Lehne. He must have sent it after he got the message from Collins. It said ‘done negotiating, only deal open is the first one. Details to follow.’ It was a blocked number, but who else would it be? I fucked up, I’m sorry.”

“You couldn’t know they were going to…” Jared began.

“I didn’t know, but I’d started to suspect. We’ve been chasing some information for the last week, and with Jensen’s info about that night, we were getting close.”

“We?” Chris asked. “We?” He turned to Jeff. “You wouldn’t happen to be part of this we, would you?”

“All I did was make a few calls,” Jeff snapped. “And you two ran those errands Monday.”

“Want to tell me what you’re talking about?” Jared’s voice was mild.

“It’s something I’ve been working on for more than a year.” Matt paused. “The family has been making increasingly strident plays to get money or a piece of the business. We’ve caught several employees feeding either Jared’s mother or Lehne information. Nothing actually illegal, so I couldn’t really do anything about it. I’ve been trying to figure a way to stop them once and for all. I hadn’t had any luck until recently. With the smoke bomb incident, I started putting things together. Lehne called and made an offer, remember Collins mentioned they’d been trying to get ahold of me while we were at the concert? I think they knew I was getting close. They made a second offer, lower, then Jensen positively identified Collins.”

“What does that have to do with anything?” Quinn frowned at him.

“I found out that Lehne was the one who insisted they go to the gallery that night,” Matt explained. “I called Lehne and let him know I had a witness that put Collins in the alley at the time of the attack.”

“You sneaky bastard,” Chris said. “You let them think you were going to...”

“Exactly. I’ve been using it as leverage for the last couple of calls. I was beginning to suspect they would try something rash, since their whole house of cards was about to collapse, but I thought it would be something less... physical. I should have listened to you,” Matt said to Jeff.

“Now you know,” Jeff chuckled.

“I do.” He smiled.

“I need to get dinner finished so we can open on time. You have any other impending crises?” Chris directed the question to their father and the lawyer.

“Not for the moment.”

“Good, keep it that way until after service. Quinn, give me a hand.” Chris headed into the back of the café with Quinn trailing after him.

“I’ll file a restraining order first thing on Monday,” Matt said as they left.

“Why were they at the gallery?” Jensen asked.

“The harpy goes to most of the openings, she doesn’t always take the chicks,” Matt replied. “I’m not sure why Collins was there. I plan to find out.”

“Or I will,” Jeff said dangerously.

“Dinner!” Chris called from the back.

“On that note, let’s eat and call it a day.” Jeff stood.

“That sounds like a plan,” Matt agreed and followed him out of the room.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Jensen turned to Jared.

“I am,” he said with a smile and bent to kiss him, before they headed in to dinner with the family.

Thirty-Three

Monday

The sky was full of puffy white clouds, reminding Jensen of the Southwest. There was something about the color of the sky, the clouds and the way the light slanted down that brought a nostalgic streak out in him. It seemed to happen more in the fall than any other season. Even the scents here on the plateau would take him back to cottonwood lined streams hidden in the empty land, places teeming with life. A wave of melancholy swept over him as he looked out the window waiting for the coffee to brew. It almost swallowed him until there was a break in the clouds and he could see the mountain, sparking white, some of the blue-gray granite already hidden beneath the first snow of the season.

The nights had been getting cooler, and even though they hadn't had any frost on the plateau, there had been more than night below freezing in the higher altitudes and the drive up the highway towards Crystal was filled with bright reds and oranges of the many varieties of maple and the bright yellow and gold of the cottonwoods. The week before, clouds had closed over Mount Rainier, and when they cleared the next day, the mountain had a fresh coat of white.

The family had decided to spend their day off yesterday at Federation Forest. They'd driven up in the morning, staked out one of the day-use sites, and set off to explore the trails. Jared and Matt hadn't been there before and had been surprised by the size of the old-growth fir and cedar that filled the trails above the river. Quinn had discovered a new trail that skirted the river and looped around through forest, even leading across the milk white water at one point.

Jared had brought a DSLR camera, and kept handing it to Jensen to take a picture "to see what *you* see". It was hard to resist the look Jared leveled on him and Jensen had accepted the camera and taken several pictures and handed it back. After nine requests at different points on the trail, the family had urged Jensen to keep the camera. He'd finally agreed, and had spent the rest of the walk playing with the settings on the lens and camera. Somehow Jared could pick up on those moments when Jensen would feel that need to paint that translated into a horrible ache in his hands. In fact, after Jensen took a moment to think about it, the first time Jared asked him to take a picture that day had coincided with the ache. The family caught on, and after an hour, they were finding things for pictures as well.

The family had been working hard to keep his mind off today. They were all going back to the surgeon to get the verdict on surgery. The week had been a mixture of tests and work, the days flying by, but sometimes the hours dragging. Jensen had nearly, as Quinn said, every test in the alphabet, from the MRI and EMG, to CT scans and X-rays and he suspected some others he'd missed. It still seemed impossibly fast, but of course, none of them had ever dealt with the world of medicine with the kind of money Jared commanded.

In between tests, Jensen had continued working at the house. Jeff or one of his brothers would show up to "help" for part of the day. More than once, Jensen had suppressed a sigh when he'd seen one of their vehicles coming up the drive. He didn't say anything because he knew they were at least as nervous as he was, and they needed to be with him. It had been the same immediately after the attack. Of course, Matt dropped by every day with coffee.

The evenings were left to Jared. He was working from his home office as much as possible, and even when he had to go into the city, he would make a point to be done by seven and they would share dinner. Sometimes something Chris had sent from the café, sometimes Jared would order something delivered. After eating they would head up to watch TV on the third floor. The relationship was moving forward at a comfortable pace, and they would spend the evening together on the soft couch. Even so, things hadn't progressed far physically. For Jensen, it made the caresses and intimacy they exchanged special. He'd had physical

relationships, in fact, that was really all he'd had, nothing beyond the momentary release. And he wanted more from Jared, and he was willing to take time—even when Jared's hands would...

The sound of the coffee machine sputtering out the last of the water brought him back to the kitchen. Today they would find out the results of the tests and he was caught between terror and the need for it to be done. It was hard to face the day with the specter of the appointment on the horizon. It was there, haunting him, no matter what he was doing. Here, at the farm, it didn't matter, it was always there. In fact, he knew he'd overworked himself more than once in the last few days as the appointment got closer.

"Coffee ready?" Jared asked, coming into the kitchen.

"Yeah, it just got done." Jensen stirred sugar into the cup and handed it to him.

"Thanks." He dropped a kiss on Jensen's lips, then took a drink of coffee. "You ready for today?"

"No," Jensen answered honestly, feeling fear curl in his stomach warring with the now steady flame of hope.

"It's going to be fine. Speight and Benedict are the best there is, and they'll be able to fix things," Jared said confidently. "I just cleared the calendar for today and tomorrow. So we have plenty of time to celebrate."

"I think Chris has a victory dinner planned before service."

"He does." Jared grinned, the smile sparkling in his eyes.

"What are you up to?"

"Nothing."

"You know, you don't really do the innocent thing well." Jensen laughed.

"Quinn's been coaching me."

"He is the last person to take lessons on looking innocent from."

"I'm beginning to think that," Jared agreed. "I need to run an errand before the appointment, want to come? I talked with your boss and he said you can have the time off."

"Nice of him."

"I know, right?" He laughed.

"What's he want in return?" Jensen asked with a grin.

Jared set his cup down and pulled him close. "I can think of a few things." He ran his hand over Jensen's face before bending and gently nibbling at his lips. Jensen pressed himself closer, his mouth hungrily seeking Jared's.

Thirty-Four

Monday

The base and the top of Mount Rainier were visible, the middle wrapped in a belt of gray as the sun played hide and seek in the gathering clouds when they headed up the highway towards Enumclaw. Jensen was trying to focus on the passing scenery and ignore the growing knot in his stomach as Jared drove through town and onto highway 169. The road led through farmland as it wound its way towards the Green River gorge.

"Have you ever been there?" Jared asked, breaking the companionable silence in the truck.

"Been where?" Jensen asked, looking around, wondering what he was talking about.

“There.” Jared pointed to the brown sign they were passing that said “Flaming Geyser State Part, Left, Five Miles Ahead”.

“Once.”

“What’s it like? There’s a sign for it on Highway 18, too. I’ve passed it, and always wondered.”

“It’s not as, well to use Quinn’s term, ‘geyser-y’ as you’d expect from the name. We drove out there, and I think we were all expecting something a little like Yellowstone.”

“Only with fire.” Jared nodded in agreement.

“It’s actually a small flame at the end of a pipe. Sometimes it even goes out in the wind and they have to relight it.”

“Sounds a little anticlimactic?” Jared said with a smile.

“Definitely. There are nice picnic grounds along the river, but it tends to be crowded and the river is full of screaming kids all summer.”

“What about the Greenriver gorge?”

“I’ve seen pictures of it online, but so far we haven’t found it.” Jensen laughed. “We’ve driven over the bridge, of course, but I mean we never found the park—or even the parking for the park. There’s a road and it leads through banjo country.”

“Banjo country?” Jared frowned in confusion.

“You know, the kind of road that, in movies, inevitably leads to cannibals or serial killers or random monsters?”

“I’ve been on a few roads like that.” He laughed.

“Yeah, so we followed the signs, but never did find the parking.” Jensen sighed. “I was kind of pissed we never found it, I really wanted to see it. I wanted to paint…” He stopped.

“We’ll go looking for it,” Jared said, reaching across the center console and taking his hand.

“Yeah. Where are we going?”

“I told you, an errand.”

“I thought you took today off?” Jensen made it a question, rather than a statement. He knew that Jared rarely got an entire day off, and more than once had spent part of their evenings nestled on the couch together going through emails. Jensen didn’t mind, except Jared seemed to always have work looming over his head. Running a large business—several—took time, he understood that, but sometimes it felt like Jared was… Jensen cast around, trying to think of what he meant, but he couldn’t quite pin it down. All really knew is he worried about Jared and he wasn’t the only one. Matt had confided in him, and Quinn had mentioned several graveyard shift phone calls between the two of them.

“I did take the day off. It’s a personal errand.” He grinned, dimples appearing in his cheeks. “And there’s a new candy shop, it’s supposed to have opened last week. The sign claimed they would have handmade chocolates.”

“Candy?”

“You got a problem with candy?” Jared’s mock scowl made him laugh.

“No, you just didn’t seem like the candy type.”

“Depends on the candy, really.” His grin changed to a soft smile. “The second summer I stayed with Matt, we did some work for the neighbor and he paid us. There was an old-fashioned drug store in town. One of the ones that had every candy known to man. It was on one whole wall of the store. We tried one of everything we could afford. It was an epic stomach ache, but totally worth it.”

“I bet.”

“They had a few things that were unusual and, of course, those were the ones I liked best.” He chuckled. “And when I was in Europe, I discovered marzipan. I developed a taste for it, and I am always looking for a new source.”

“You should ask the Petersens to make some,” Jensen said. “They’re the ones that have the store in Enumclaw. We carry their chocolates at the café.”

“I will.”

They drove through a valley with a lake on one side of the road and a large farm on the other, a red barn dominating the property. The valley was bordered by forest on each side, and it seemed like they were in the middle of nowhere for a moment. But only a moment. As they crested the hill, Jensen could see a shopping area with a large grocery store surrounded by smaller businesses, all looking very, very new.

“I have a love hate relation with malls like this,” Jared said, turning into the lot.

“Why?”

“Well, I hate that they are destroying farmland and forests to build them.”

“Okay, but?”

“But almost all of them have one of those.” He pointed towards the corner of the mall. The Beast and Co. Coffee sign sat on top the building. He grinned. “Want to be a secret shopper?”

“What?”

“Let’s go in and spot check their service. It’s fun. The candy shop’s a couple doors down.”

“Sure.” Jensen looked at the building. There was an “open” sign on a brightly colored door, that also promised “candy for every taste”. Next to that was a pet store, and between the pet store and the grocery store was a frame shop. It was typical for the area, a mix of higher end stores, in fact on the other side of the grocery he spotted a wine and beer store and then a designer clothing shop.

“This isn’t the errand?” Jensen asked suspiciously as they walked towards the coffee shop.

“No,” Jared assured him. “I just go in when I have a chance. I like to make sure things are up to snuff.” He smiled. “Be a bit difficult.”

“Difficult?”

“Yeah, be picky about your order, or complain it’s not right.” He opened the door and waited for Jensen to go in.

Jensen walked up to the counter to order, the cashier asked for his order sounding bored. He wasn’t sure what to do to be “difficult”. He glanced up at the menu, and an idea occurred to him. “What’s in the Beastly Vanilla?”

She made a face. “It says up there.” She waved her hand at the menu board.

“The type is too small to read from here,” he said, squinting.

“Okay,” she turned her back to him, and read the ingredients off the sign.

“And the Beastly Mocha?”

“It’s the same thing, only with chocolate.”

“So they all have an extra shot?”

“Yes.”

“How many in the medium then?”

“Four.” She rolled her eyes.

“Hmmm.” Jensen continued squinting at the sign.

“Dude, are you going to order or what?”

“I’m not sure.” He glanced back at Jared and was shocked at the look on his face.

“Maybe you should order first?”

“Seriously?” she snapped. “Whatever. What do you want?” she asked, glowering at him before looking at Jared.

“The manager,” Jared said amiably.

“What?”

“I’d like to speak to the manager,” he repeated.

“Why?” she asked rudely.

“What’s going on, Lisa?” the man who’d been at the drive-thru window asked, walking over to the counter.

“Guy wants to talk with you.”

“Is there a problem?” he asked, turning to Jared. His name tag said “George, Front Manager”

“There is. She doesn’t seem to know the menu and she was rude to my friend.” Jared glanced around the shop. “And there was no one here when we walked in, but there are empty cups and a spill on that table.” He pointed to the table nearest the counter. Jensen hadn’t even noticed. “She also doesn’t have her name tag on.” Jared’s voice was hard, showing a side of him that Jensen had only glimpsed once or twice.

“We’ve been busy this morning.”

“You weren’t when I walked in.” He smiled, a predatory gleam in his eye. “And you never know who will walk in, George.” Jared handed the man a business card.

George’s eyes flicked down to the card, the blood drained out of his face, and he looked back up, his eyes wide. “Um, sorry, um, sir, I... Lisa, go get your name tag. Uh... I...” He gave her a little push towards the back.

“I’ll let you off with a warning, but don’t let it happen again.”

“Yes, sir! Thank you, sir!”

Jared turned and walked out of the place without looking back. Jensen followed and as soon as they were out of sight of the windows, Jared smiled ruefully. “Sorry, that wasn’t as much fun as I’d hoped. Usually they pass with flying colors and I give them all a bonus or something.”

“It’s okay, you’re kind of cute when you’re scary.”

“In that case it was totally worth it,” he grinned.

They walked into the candy shop, and Jared enthusiastically purchased a variety of items, including chocolates and other things. The shop also offered twenty different kinds of fudge, and they sampled them all. The owner was chatty and told them he would be sponsoring a taffy pull in two weeks as part of a grand opening that would include demonstrations. Jared promised they would be back and they left. Jensen turned to head back to the truck, but Jared led him into the frame shop.

“Mr. Padalecki, it’s good to see you again,” a woman said, coming from the back. “I’ll get your package.”

“Thank you.”

“Did find out about it?” she asked, coming back with a large, brown-paper wrapped item.

“Not yet.”

“Oh, that’s too bad. We were hoping you’d had the change. Next month is open at Gabe’s”

“Gabe’s?” he said, glancing at Jensen with a secretive smile.

“Yes!” she explained happily.

“I’ll see what I can do.” He winked at her and after a little more small talk, they left.

“What was that all about?” Jensen asked as he got into the truck.

“They just opened the shop up here. They have one in town too. The one in town is managed by their son now.”

“I’m still confused.”

“Here.” Jared handed the package to Jensen, then turned to truck on. “I told you I wanted a copy of it.”

“What?” Jensen had no idea what Jared was talking about. He tore the brown paper and found himself looking at the photo he’d taken of the mountain more than a month before, the first one he’d shown to Jared.

“Luckily you had the phone set for a large image.”

“I’m still not sure what you’re talking about.”

“They own a gallery, too, that’s what Gabe manages.”

“Okay.” He suddenly realized what Jared was talking about. “Gallery?” he growled out, trying to control the anger that had suddenly rushed through him.

“They were so excited when they saw your picture and I told them I would talk to the photographer.”

“Oh?” Jensen couldn’t get a handle on his emotions. His hands were shaking and he had no idea *why* he was so upset. “And you just thought that was okay?”

“What?” Jared looked over, a frown on his face. “What’s wrong?”

“Wrong?” he whispered his voice harsh.

“Jensen?”

“You set this up. You knew!”

“Of course I knew. I told you they asked about the photographer.”

“So you decided to just bring me along and see what exactly?”

“Hey,” Jared said softly, reaching for his hand where it was laying, trembling, on top the package. “I wanted you to hear her, not get it from me. I keep telling you your pictures are special. As beautiful as...”

“Don’t.” The word snapped out of him. “Don’t offer it to me like some rotten bone tossed to the starving dog.”

“I’m not,” Jared snapped back.

“Right. I’m sure Chris didn’t put you up to it. Or Jeff or Quinn or Matt, for that matter.”

Jared looked guilty for a moment. “They knew I was getting it framed.”

“Great.”

“Why are you so angry?”

Jensen took a breath, the anger boiling in his veins. “I don’t know.”

“It’s okay, Jensen. It’s going to be okay.” He pulled the truck off the road, put the package in the back seat of the cab and pull Jensen against him in a hug. It was complicated a little by the bucket seat and the console, but Jensen leaned into him, trying to find calm.

“I know, I think that’s what’s scaring me so much. That it’s going to be okay. It’s not been okay for so long.”

“I understand. I really do,” he said softly. “You’ll see.”

“I know.”

Jared dropped a kiss on Jensen's forehead and sat up. A moment later they were back in the road. "Only a couple of hours and you'll see." Jared smiled. "They're miracle workers."

Two hours later, the family gathered in the expensively decorated office, they learned the results of the tests.

In Jensen's case, there would be no miracle.

Thirty-Five

The doctor was still speaking when Jensen stood, his legs moving without his brain being completely engaged. Speight stopped and stared at him, like he was unused to being interrupted. A part of Jensen couldn't blame him, but the rest was screaming *get out, go somewhere, anyplace*. He cast a wild glance at his family, trying stop himself.

Chris met his eyes, and after a glance at Jeff—who nodded—held out the keys to his car. "I'll ride with Jared."

"We're not finished," the doctor protested.

"We'll be here. Jensen needs to go," Jeff said, glaring at the doctor.

"Thanks." Jensen took the keys and headed towards the door. He heard a commotion behind him and Jared's voice, then Quinn and Jeff answering. To his relief he made it out of the building with no one following him. He got into Chris's car and put it into gear, spinning the tires in his hurry to get away.

Grief was burning a hole in his heart, in his soul. The loss of hope feeling like he was dying, like he was being torn apart.

He pulled onto the highway and turned east, heading into the mountains. It was same road they'd driven the day before, laughing and joking as they planned the day. It was the same road he'd driven with Jared the weekend before when they'd gone to Mud Mountain Dam and shared a quiet moment overlooking the White River. It was the same road they'd driven to Crystal, where he'd discovered his heart had room to let someone in.

All of that seemed gone as he drove the road now, speeding a little as he started to climb. He blasted through Greenwater, somehow missing the usual speed trap and kept going, the emotion driving him forward until finally, tears blurred his eyes. He tried to wipe them away to clear his vision, but it didn't work, so when he spotted the pull out for the Skookum Falls scenic overlook, he got off the road and stumbled out of the car.

The peace of the place surrounded him. The giant granite cliffs seemed to absorb some of his grief as he let his tears fall. He sat on the wall, his legs dangling over the river as it rushed by. He fixed his eyes on the ribbon of water dropping from the cliff across from him, looking like a tiny veil decorating the gray stone. In the winter, the entire cliff face would be full of water, and after a cold spell, large spikes of ice would line the cliff, looking like jagged teeth.

What now? The thought ripped through him, leaving an open wound in its wake.

There was nothing, no hope. The thought that he might paint again had been what kept him going some nights when things got bad. It had been that faint hope that kept him from leaving, from ending everything. Even when Stupid Therapist had hurt him, he'd still had that hope. The thought he would be able to paint again had always been there, since the attack, even

when he tried to ignore it hope had been there. His family agreed and they all believed it was just a matter of expense. It was only the time it would take to get the money saved. He'd tried to resist hope when it had started growing with his first visit to Dr. Speight. A few tests, and there was hope. The doctors had lied.

It had all been a lie.

What now?

Anger suddenly found its way in. The family had to have known. It had been an act. All these years had been an act. These last weeks. Jared must have known too, and that was why he arranged that farcical trip to the frame shop. A last meal before they cut his throat, and took his hope away, he thought bitterly. The anger was becoming rage that raced through him like a wildfire in a dry forest. It was completely irrational, he even knew that, but it didn't matter. The rage felt better than the pain. They'd known and they'd betrayed him, a voice whispered against his heart, fanning the flames. Even as a large part of him denied it, tried to shout back at the anger. the anger grew, the tears driving on his face as the emotion filled him. His family, his Jared had betrayed him.

He had nothing to live for, no reason to go on. It was all gone. He was drowning.

Jensen stood, he knew what he needed to do, but there were promises that had to be kept. He walked to the car to get his phone. When he'd made his promise not to leave, when they all had, there had been a clause—an out. But he had to call first, to give them a chance to talk. He wasn't sure he was ready to hear them, wasn't ready for anything but the anger. He wrenched open the door of the car and reached for his phone.

No bars. No fucking bars. Great.

He stared up at the granite cliff towering above him, tears burning in his eyes again. The trees somehow were growing on that impossible slope. The clouds were moving through them like fog in the lowlands. Even now, his brain registered how beautiful it was. Without thinking about it, he raised his phone and snapped a picture. He glanced at the screen, surprised at how much he liked the photo. It had a black and white effect, even though it was a color photo. There were one or two others he'd taken that had that effect.

Jensen tossed the phone back onto the seat and paced back and forth, trying to recapture the anger that was ebbing as quickly as it had come. Feeling despair welling up, he tried to find the rage, fan the sparks back into a fire. Rage was easier, anger simpler than grief. He'd had his fill of grief, and fear, and everything else. He'd tried so hard since the attack. It was all for nothing.

And he was back to that point. Hope ripped away, his soul open and bleeding. God, it fucking hurt so much. It was too much. He closed his eyes and leaned back against the car. It was the thing he'd hidden from for the last two years, the reason why he tried to give the savings account to his family more than once. In all honesty, he hadn't wanted to know the truth. He didn't want to know he'd never paint again. The pain was secondary, he could live with the ache, the cramps, the occasional spasms like he'd had the day of his panic attack at Jared's. But he couldn't live with the thought he'd never paint again. Not just a thought at this point, a reality. His hands would never be able to do that, the thing that had been his way of speaking, of sharing the world he saw.

A drop of rain hit his face and he opened his eyes. Black clouds had massed over his head, the wind a cold blast of air. He shivered and glanced at his watch. It was getting late. He should get down into cell range before it got dark. It would be unfair to let them worry for too long. He was a man of his word, he'd promised he'd call.

He pulled on the road, the rumble of the engine buzzing down his hands as he headed down the mountain. The combination of storm and approaching sunset was making it darker than usual, the road a shining dark ribbon in the deep gloom of the trees. The Northwest had a long, lingering twilight—except on days like this. Twilight was not even a thought on days like this, the clouds closed in, with the dark rain, and day would become night with very little segue.

Jensen picked up his phone and checked the signal. Still nothing. He put it back down as he slowed to go through Greenwater, passing Dusty's on the western side of town. He looked at his phone again. Still no bars. The longer he drove, checking the phone periodically, the harder it was to hold on to that particular thought. It was a question he'd asked more than once since the attack. A question he'd asked his brothers during their darkest hours. Things were bad, terrible, awful, but was death the answer? They'd talked about that more than once, the wounds that led to that thought. Memories, fear, pain, it all led to a place where death seemed like the only way. But every time, they'd managed to come out the other side. Family, work, the animals, it all meant something.

The thing he'd been living for was gone, but did that mean...

His thought was cut off as a car pulled out to pass on the other side. It was a no-passing zone for a reason, and the other driver had no chance to react. Jensen pulled hard on his steering wheel to avoid the speeding vehicle, wondering if the asshole had even seen him. It happened in slow motion and super high speed. He saw the car, had time to think "asshole" and get his car out of the way. He did not have time to correct, however, and the abrupt shoulder edge caught the wheel of the car and flicked him off the road. He caught a glimpse of trees in the headlights before the car slammed into something, causing the airbags to fire. There was another huge thump, pain exploded in his head, then there was nothing.

Thirty-Six

Monday

It was cold, that was the first thing he was really aware of, the cold. It had seeped into every part of him making him ache. Then he noticed the actual pain. He was injured, but he couldn't remember why. When he opened his eyes to try and figure everything out, terror ran through him. He couldn't see anything, he was blind. That was the thing he'd always been terrified of, losing his sight. No. He couldn't face that. He couldn't. He moved his hand and came into contact with the steering wheel.

Steering wheel? Bits and pieces came back. He'd been in his brother's car. Someone had been in his lane. It had been dark. He blinked again, confused. Was that right? His brain turned on a little more. Maybe he wasn't blind. He'd been on 410. There were no street lights for miles and miles. Maybe it was just dark? Jensen carefully stretched his right hand across the car and fumbled with the glove box. Chris always had a flashlight and an emergency blanket in the car. As his fingers closed over the flashlight, he felt a stab of pain across his chest. He flicked the light on and blinked in the bright glare. He wasn't blind. He breathed out a sigh of relief.

The relief didn't last long. He could feel the pain of what he knew had to be injuries. His head, his chest and his left leg were definitely hurt, although how badly, he couldn't tell. It wasn't like the few seconds of consciousness after the attack when he had this strange sinking sensation—it was almost impossible to describe—that let him know he was seriously, maybe

even fatally injured. This didn't feel the same, although his forehead felt weirdly cold and sticky. He lifted a hand to it, and his fingers came away covered in blood. That wasn't good.

He reached to undo his seatbelt and that's when he realized the car was sitting at an angle. The passenger side at a distinct angle up from him. Swinging the light towards the passenger window, he could see the light hitting the trunks of trees up a hill. He turned to his window. There was a tree against the cracked glass. The glass was cracked? He looked at the windshield. It was broken too. Chris was going to murder him.

He took a slow breath, trying to get his brain to function. It still felt sluggish, but he knew he was cold, and he knew that was not good. Keep warm. When he'd been attacked, he remembered someone putting a warm coat over him while they'd waited for rescue. He pulled the emergency blanket out of the glove box and unfolded the silver material, wrapping it around him as well as he could without moving too much. If something was broken, he didn't want to make it worse. It would be better to stay warm, stay dry and stay put. That was lesson one of survival Jeff had drilled into them when they were kids and played in the desert. If something happened, stay put, he'd come looking.

His family. They must be freaking out. It was dark, when had he left the doctor's office? Jensen fumbled for his phone, hoping he'd had a signal. No such luck, not only was there no signal, his battery was at ten percent. The clock on his phone said it was almost nine-thirty. How long had he been out? It had been getting dark when he left the falls, but... How had it gotten to be this late?

His family would be losing their minds. They knew he'd been in bad shape emotionally when he'd left the doctor's, the look Chris had given him had said far more than any words. His brothers knew, his father knew—Jensen was broken when he left. The only reason they'd let him leave, probably, was the promise he'd made. They would trust him to keep it, but... they also knew what it was like to be caught in the maelstrom of emotion, of hurt and memory, of pain and going on.

God, Jared. He had so much pain of his own. Jensen had learned even more of his story from Matt after Collins had been arrested. Jared had been minimizing a lot of stuff up to and including when he'd told Jensen his parents had beaten him. Matt had told him about the years of mental abuse even after Jared had ceased to visit his mother. The lawyer also confided that Jared never had been serious about anyone, really, before now.

That was true for Jensen as well. He'd never even wanted to get serious, and now, his heart was wholly and completely Jared's. There wasn't enough time in the day, or so it seemed. Even with the doctors and tests, the time with Jared was special. The fact they hadn't gone further than caresses and kisses, made it more special. Not that Jensen was a prude about sex, if anything it was usually the reverse. Sex before anything else and discovering sex was all there was in the end. It wasn't that way Jared.

The photo Jared had framed came back to haunt him. Jensen had been an ass about the picture. He still wasn't even sure why he had gotten so mad. Even after they'd made up, after the moment in Jared's arms, there had still been a little wedge between them. Now that he thought about it, Jared had been encouraging him since he'd seen that photo. Since the first night Jensen had shared it, Jared had been subtly encouraging him to use the camera on his phone. He always asked at night if Jensen had taken a picture—and until Jared had started asking, Jensen never realized how many pictures he actually took. It was an unconscious thing. In fact, as he scrolled through his gallery to show Jared something, he realized he took pictures without even consciously registering it. There were hundreds of them on his phone.

Knowing it was foolish, since the GPS on the phone needed battery to function, he opened his phone to the gallery. He looked, really looked, at the photos. A lot of them were exactly what he told Jared they were, just snapshots. Pretty pictures, but there was nothing special about them. They were the kind of thing that appeared on lockscreens and computer desktops, that filled social media. Some were pretty in a prosaic way; others were cute in the same way—the horses playing or the hummingbird at the feeder.

There were others though, the ones Jared always stopped on. One or two that Jared had emailed to himself. If Jensen was honest with himself, there was something more to those photos. The one he'd taken earlier that day at Skookum Falls was one of those. There was something about the way the trees were clinging to the steep cliff, as if they were defying everything, proving life was tough, that it could survive anywhere. The soft swirl of clouds through them captured a moment, a perfect drop of time. It was what he'd painted. That sense of the moment with the entirety of experience captured there. When Jared had explained the way he saw the paintings, the emotion that filled Jensen was hard to explain. He never expected people to see what he was trying to catch. Mostly people saw a pretty picture.

A pretty picture. The words bounced around in his head as he thought about all the times he'd said those words about a photo he'd taken. He always told himself he was taking them just to remember how something looked. It was true what he told Jared, he never painted from photos, it was a different discipline. It was different, but maybe it wasn't as far removed from the core of his art as he'd thought it was. Light was so important in his painting, it was the heart of every picture. It was the thing that changed from instant to instant making the world different with every tick of the clock.

The phone turned off, leaving him alone in the car with just the small light from the flashlight. He was cold, even with the blanket. He hoped it was only cold and not shock. Even if no one was looking for him now, someone would see where he'd gone off the road in the morning.

No, his family would be looking for him. Even if they thought he'd broken his promise, not called, and killed himself, they would still look. Chris had explained how he felt one night when they still lived in the desert and Quinn had left a note and disappeared. No one was left behind, and that included a body. Chris couldn't rest, couldn't even wait for the police, before starting to look for their brother. Jensen knew it would be the same now. They knew which way he went when he was upset, they knew where he stopped. They knew him as well as he did himself—maybe better sometimes.

For all he knew, he might not even be that far off the road. He couldn't see headlights, but the car was at a weird angle and he was looking up into the trees rather than towards where he thought the road should be. Things were really starting to hurt and he was beginning to get sleepy. He knew sleeping with a head wound was a bad idea. It was getting harder and harder to stay awake. Every time he started to nod off, he would feel like he was getting warm.

That wasn't good.

Jensen wished he hadn't run the battery down on his phone. He could record a message for his family and Jared. He tried to shove that fatalistic thought away, they would find him, he wasn't that badly injured. The problem was his brain was starting to play tricks on him. Trying to convince him he was hurt worse than he thought, because sometimes serious injuries would could seem to not be as painful. It was trying to tell him he'd blown it with Jared, he'd been an asshole, then stormed out, even though he knew Jared had tried to follow. He'd let his family stop Jared. That same part of him, the part that had whispered *betrayal* not to long before, was

now telling him how he'd betrayed himself. How he'd fallen into the easy pattern of life and hadn't done anything that would make people miss him. No one would look for him. He wouldn't even be a cross on the side of the road.

Hot tears burned in his eyes. Jensen knew it wasn't true. His family would never let that happen. He just wished he had a chance to tell them that. Thank them for everything they'd done. Tell Jared how much he meant, how days were so much better because he was in them.

He was starting to really let down. He hadn't slept much the night before, or the night before that and that coupled with the emotions of the day, the cold and whatever injuries he had were mixing and pulling him under. He tried to fight it, even stabbing a fingernail in his palm to try and use the sharp pain to wake him up.

Lightning flashed and his heart fell. If it was storming, it would slow a search down, assuming anyone was out looking yet. Maybe they thought he'd gone somewhere to stay overnight. He'd done that once or twice, but he always called to let them know. Surely they'd remember that.

Another flash of lighting lit the car, there was a thump and a sudden rush of cold air.

"He's here, we've got him," a voice called.

Jensen closed his eyes against the onslaught of the bright light.

"Hang on," the voice said. "We're going to get you out of here, there's a stretcher on the way down the hill."

Jensen tried to answer but it all caught up and he let himself go, knowing he was safe.

Thirty-Seven

The emergency room had been quiet when he'd arrived. Medical staff met them at the door and he was in a gown and whisked off to imaging before they even put him in a room. The guy at the CT scan told him they'd been expecting him—rescue had called ahead. When he was taken to one of the rooms in ER, he was hooked up to a monitor, they hung a bag of fluids and the nurse said the doctor would be right back to see him. He laid back in the bed and hoped they'd be able to give him something for his headache. An icepack would do. He closed his eyes against the bright lights.

He sensed someone in the room and before he could open his eyes, a warm hand closed over his. "You scared the shit out of us," Jared said softly.

Jensen opened his eyes, not quite believing the evidence of his other senses. "Jared?" he asked stupidly, looking up into eyes that were over-bright from tears.

"Hey," Jared replied and bent to kiss him, then wrapped his hand in both of his.

"What are you doing here?"

"He was the first one through the door," Matt said sourly as he walked into the room. "I'm pretty sure he pushed me down." The lawyer stopped by the end of the bed, dropping his hand on Jensen's ankle.

"Where's the rest?"

"Parking, they'll be here in a minute. They were out with search and rescue, too. Jeff tried but his truck just couldn't keep up with the ambulance." Matt smiled. "We flipped a coin and I was the one who got the head start back with Jared. He didn't get to drive."

"Jared? Are you okay?" Jensen frowned at the other man.

"Yes. Now, I am."

“Excuse me, I’m Dr. Johnsen, I’d like to speak with...” He looked down at the file in his hand. “Jensen.”

“They’re family,” Jensen said quickly, all too familiar with hospital rules.

“Okay.” The doctor didn’t look convinced.

“My partner and my brother,” Jensen elaborated and hoped he didn’t freak Jared out, they hadn’t really talked about that.

“Also his lawyer,” Matt said with a grin.

“Huh?” the doctor frowned.

“What were you going to say?” Jared prompted. “How is he?”

“He’s very lucky to be here.” The doctor still seemed unsure if he should speak with them in the room or not.

A loud commotion in the hall disturbed the otherwise quiet ER.

“You waited too long.” Matt grinned.

“What?” Dr. Johnsen seemed to becoming more confused as things went on.

“Jensen, you dumbass,” Chris said as he came through the door.

“What the fuck were you thinking?” Quinn asked.

“I love you, too, shitheads,” Jensen said as loudly as his headache would allow.

Jeff walked past the doctor to stand on the side of the bed opposite Jared. He took Jensen’s other hand and squeezed it gently. “We were a little worried.”

“If a little worried means out of our fucking minds since the GeoTracker on the car sent Chris a text that the airbags had deployed, then yes.” Quinn moved to stand beside Jared and Chris to stand beside Jeff.

“Who are all these people?” the doctor demanded.

“Father, brother, brother,” Jared pointed at Jeff, Chris and Quinn. “Brother,” he pointed to Matt and then smiled down at Jensen and pointed to himself. “And partner.”

“Partner?” Quinn demanded before the doctor could even speak. “Seriously? When the fuck did...”

“Boys.” Jeff held his hand up. “Let’s make sure he’s okay before we start the party.”

Tuesday

A quiet conversation woke Jensen. A female voice and Jeff. He blinked at the ceiling a few times before he remembered where he was. He shifted in the bed, remarkably comfortable for a hospital bed, and reached for the button to sit up. His father spotted the movement and smiled, coming over to the bed.

“How do you feel?” Jeff asked gently.

“Not bad. You?”

“I’m fine, the bed here is every bit as good as the one at home.” He laughed. “Pretty nice for a hospital room.”

“It is,” Jensen agreed with a smile.

The doctor had insisted on keeping Jensen at least overnight. Jensen tried to fight it, not wanting to spend any more time in the hospital, but the doctor had been insistent. Matt had disappeared during the argument with the doctor and returned as he was leaving, nodding at Jared. Jensen wondered what the lawyer had been up to, and then found out when he was wheeled into this room. It was unlike any hospital room he’d ever been in, with comfortable chairs, a more comfortable bed than usual and a view of the mountain. Once he’d been settled

the night before, the family had drawn straws to see who would stay over with him. Jeff had won the draw and insisted that everyone, including Jared, head home to get a good night's sleep. It had been a stressful day for all of them.

"I spoke with the doctor this morning, he's willing to release you, as long as you rest for the next few days." Jeff frowned at him. "And you will rest, understand?"

"Yes, sir," Jensen said meekly.

"Jared will be here at eleven. He's going to bring you home for a few days, so we can all keep an eye on you."

"Jeff..."

"Jensen." He put his hand on Jensen's shoulder.

"You're right. I'm sorry I left like that."

"You were hurting, we understood. You just have to let us work through the worry, and let us take care of you for a few days. All of us."

"I..." He blinked back tears, remembering the reason for his flight the day before. "Jeff, my hands..."

"I know, son. There is something, though, you left before he got around to it." Jeff sat on the bed. "They think they might be able to help relieve some of the pain, if you want. It's something to think about, and you don't need to make the decision any time soon. None of us will press you either way. It has to be up to you. They can't guarantee it, of course, but they said the more than likely could."

"I'll think about it. I had time to think about a lot," Jensen said softly.

"I'm sure you did." Jeff smiled. "And we have plenty of time to talk about that too."

"Thank you." He opened his mouth to say something else, then changed his mind. That could wait too. "When do I get to leave?"

"Soon," Jeff assured him. "Very soon."

Jensen wasn't sure that his welcome home at the farm would have been what the doctor considered "quiet and rest" but he didn't care. It made him feel immediately better as he got out of Jared's truck and headed into the house. The family insisted that he stay on the couch, and Jared sat down in the chair beside the couch, keeping a possessive hand on his as the rest of the family fussed around. His family in full "fuss mode" was comforting and felt like home. Before long, Jared was dragged into the fuss and they were in and out, getting ready for service, checking on him and going out again. They let him sit at the kitchen table so they could all share dinner, and by the time they finished, he was getting sleepy, even though he'd slept part of the afternoon.

Jared helped him upstairs and then settled beside him in bed. Jensen slept for an hour, watched TV with Jared, then fell asleep again. When he woke the next morning he was cocooned in something warm, far warmer than a blanket. He moved a little and the arms that were holding him tightened. Jared was still asleep, his breath whispering over the back of Jensen's neck. It felt good, waking next to him, and Jensen felt his heart speed up as he thought about everything that meant. A wave of heat rushed through his body.

A soft chuckle sounded from behind him. Jared pulled him closer and Jensen was aware of a warm, firm weight pressing against his back. "Probably not a good idea while you're recovering," Jared said, kissing the back of his neck.

"Probably not a good idea while..." Jensen trailed off when someone pounded on the door. "Did you tell them you need to be up early?"

“I did,” Jared said with a laugh. “I assumed they’d text.”

“You assumed wrong.”

“Up and at them, Jared,” Quinn said, pounding on the door again. “You better be up and I mean out of bed.” Quinn laughed, Jensen heard Chris’ laugh as well. “There are horses to feed and coffee to make.”

Jared sighed. “Fine! I’m coming.”

“I’ll be right down, too,” Jensen said, swinging his leg out of bed.

“You’re supposed to be resting.” Jared frowned at him

“I need coffee.”

“Okay, fine, coffee, then rest.”

Jared pulled on his clothes and headed out the door. Jensen followed him a minute later. His bruises were healing and his headache was almost completely gone. If he rested today, he was sure he could convince Jeff to let him go to Jared’s in the next day or two. He knew he needed to recover from the accident—all of them needed time to recover before he left. Once he felt a little better, he could get back to work. There was a lot to do, the stable needed to be finished before the frost closed in. Quinn and Chris had promised to come over to help set up tables for the greenhouse and Jared had hired an electrician to put in lighting for the plants.

The sun was shining, bathing the mountains in a soft glow. There was a definite change in the air. It had been cold overnight, and the light of late fall spilled onto the stairs. Jensen looked at the mountain for a moment, then took several pictures, enjoying the way the light was moving, changing the look of the land and sky from moment to moment. For the first time since the attack, he let himself really see what was there, to love it the way that he thought he never would again. It felt good, despite an ache in his hands, the pain of grief in his chest was gone. He’d lived with the pain since the attack, and maybe it was part of this person, the one who’d been born that night on the wet pavement.

Jeff’s laughter boomed out of the kitchen as Jensen approached. The rich smell of coffee and baking cinnamon rolls filled the hallway as he walked into the bright room. Chris was at the stove, stirring something in a skillet, judging by the mouthwatering smell, it was something involving bacon. Quinn was pouring coffee, Jared getting something from the refrigerator and Matt was setting the table. They all looked up with a smile as he entered.

It was everything he needed, all he needed in fact. He was home.